Giant western

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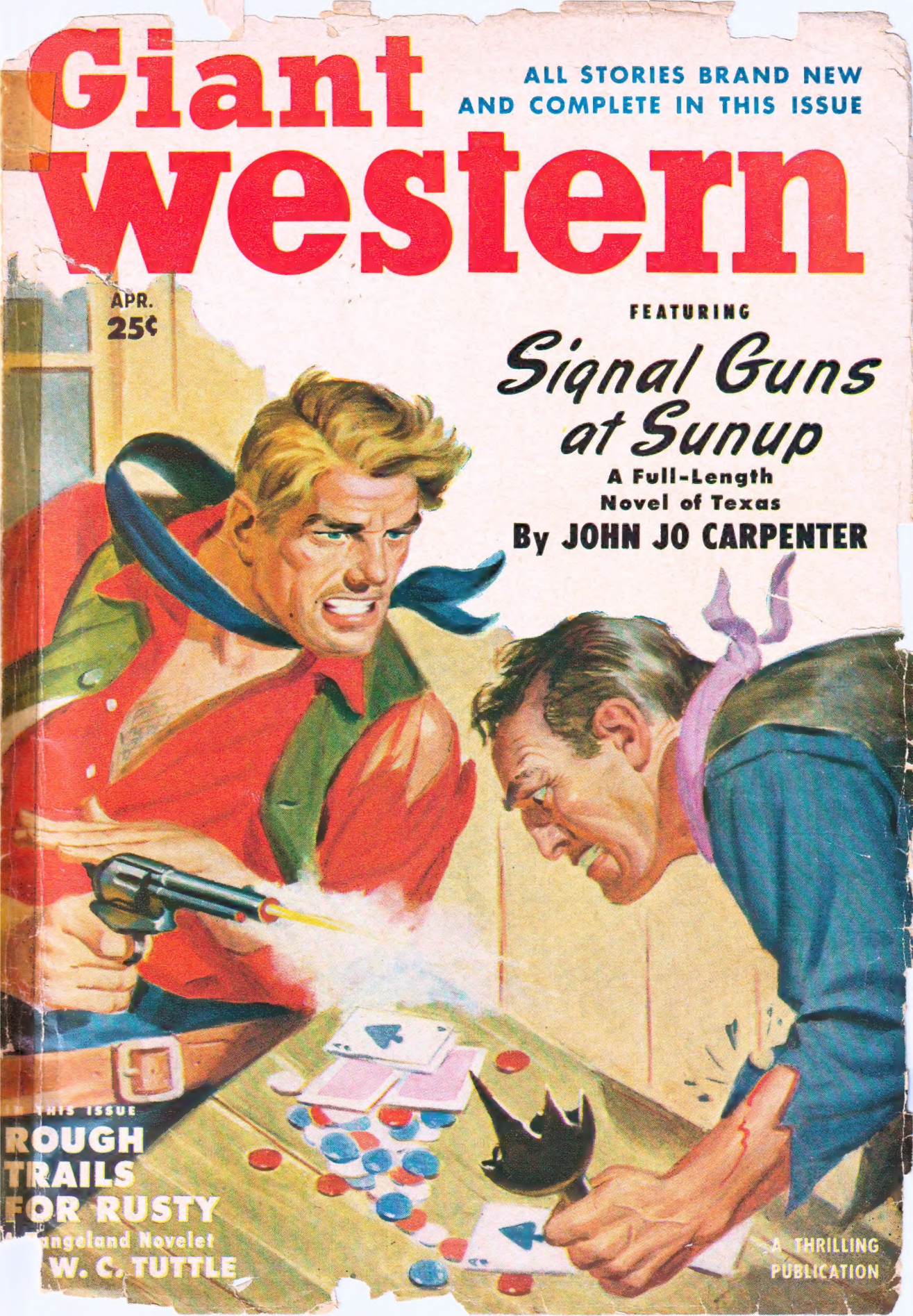
FEATURING

Signal Guns at Sunup

A Full-Length Novel of Texas

By JOHN JO CARPENTER



IN THIS ISSUE

ROUGH TRAILS FOR RUSTY

Rangeland Novelet

W. C. TUTTLE

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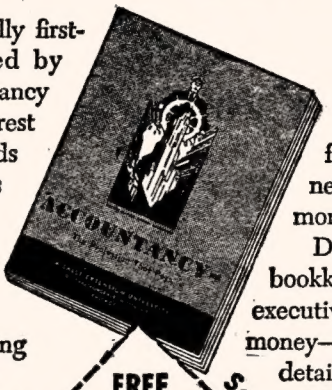

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Giant western

VOL. 5, No. 2 APRIL, 1950 Price 25c

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SIGNAL GUNS AT SUNUP . . JOHN JO CARPENTER 11

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ROUGH TRAILS FOR RUSTY . . . . W. C. TUTTLE 80

Only "Rusty" Rawlins knew that the man appointed by the court to be his guardian was no genuine uncle, but a scheming and ruthless killer who was slyly awaiting his chance to exact a toll of doom!

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Where all hands get together to ride herd on a gala fiction roundup

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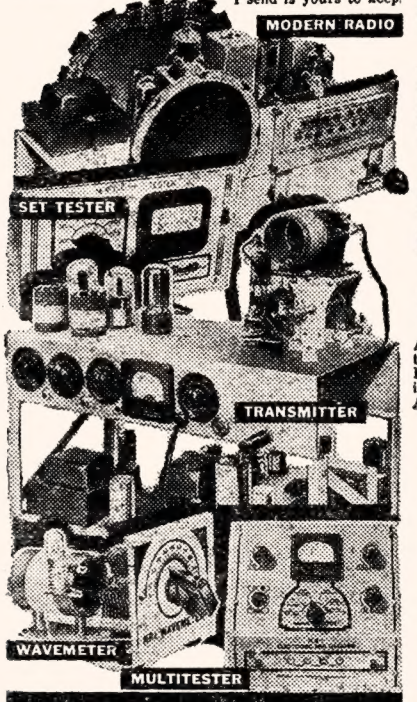

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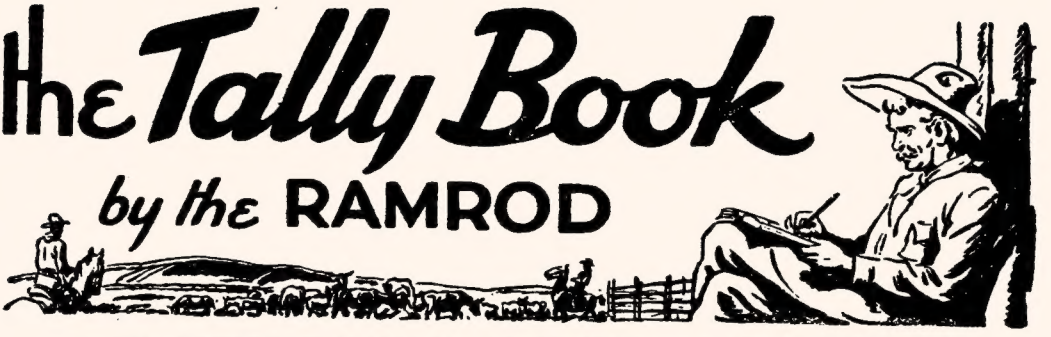
The Tally Book by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

RIDING herd on the yarns for GIANT WESTERN is a right interesting chore, as you boys out yonder will probably appreciate. There's always the excitement of going after a particularly good story and the thrill of getting it and the suspense of searching for the top grade stuff hidden amongst the common herd.

Then, every once in a while, something happens clear out of the ordinary and from there on you tell time by it. Something like that is happening in our next issue of GIANT WESTERN.

We're calling it a six star issue because it is going to have, all in one issue, stories by six of the all-time big name writers in western fiction.

Some are new, young writers, some real old timers. For instance, we are bringing you stories by B. M. Bower, of Flying U fame, and Charles Alden Seltzer, whose books are already classics of western fiction.

We've also got W. C. Tuttle, who writes the Hashnife Hartley stories and the Tombstone and Speedy stories in our companion magazine EXCITING WESTERN. And there's Edwin L. Sabin, whose name has been on the cover of every important magazine on the stands, and Walt Coburn, who needs no introduction to anyone. And Norman A. Fox, whose Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis stories have skyrocketed him to a top position among western scribblers. Let's talk a bit about these stories.

Rowdy and Stumpy

The long novel is by Norman A. Fox. It's called THE PHANTOM SPUR and it's about those two efficient characters, Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis. Now if you are unfortunate enough never to have run across the hilarious adventures of these two headaches to the unwary, friend, you have a treat in store for you. The old Ramrod had himself a wonderful time reading THE PHANTOM SPUR when it came in here and you're going to do the same. It's what I'd call good reading—you know, the kind that you don't have to force yourself to go on, you just can't tear yourself away from it.

Rowdy Dow and Stumpy are hired as trouble shooters by a railroad which is having some very peculiar troubles. Not Injuns. Nope. Seems as if their Chinese laborers are being scared off by dragons!

Yessir, dragons in the West. And the job the boys get is to go out and hunt down said dragons. St. George Rowdy Dow, dragon hunter. Well, the job isn't as funny as it sounds, there being some lead tossed around that could drain a man's ambition quick if it connected in the right spot. But there is also an old maid schoolteacher who owns three shares of stock and thinks it gives her the right to run the railroad who adds plenty to the laughs and a child prodigy who adds confusion.

Confidentially this long story is a riot from start to finish and we'll bet a pinon nut against that old saddle out on the corral fence that if you've never met up with Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis before, you'll thank us for the introduction. If you know the boys, you'll know what to expect. Laughs, action, shooting, surprises, all fast and furious.

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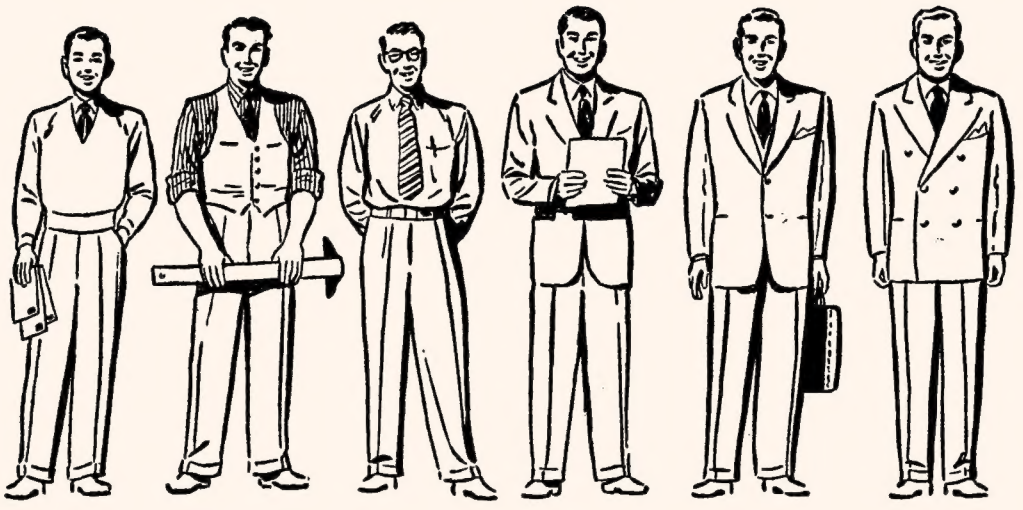

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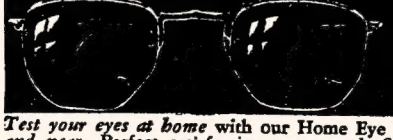

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

Walt Coburn contributes a long novelet called HANGED MAN'S REP and this is a change from the rowdy humor of Rowdy Dow. Nobody tops Coburn in what we professional fellers call dramatic intensity; to put it another way, it's the kind of story that gets you down inside and you find you're holding your breath and your hair is standing straight up on end.

HANGED MAN'S REP is the story of Grady Burke, who's been railroaded to jail on a cattle rustling charge, but is released through the work of a sympathetic sheriff who knows he is innocent. The plot thickens when Burke finds he is a twin for looks to Jim Lynch, a crooked stock detective and gets thicker yet when Lynch is hanged by the cattlemen who had sent Burke to jail.

There's plenty of dirty work afoot as Burke sets out to crack the shell of the mystery, which he will if you can stand the suspense. Coburn, the old master, knows how to pile it on. Don't try to hold your breath until you finish it.

A Flying U Yarn

Those are the two long stories. Then there's the shorter ones. The B. M. Bower yarn is a little classic of the Flying U, called WEARY SAVES THE FLYING U.

It tells how the cook fell sick and the Flying U, faced with starvation, sent Weary for the doctor. Weary made the trip in record time, to find the doctor too drunk to ride or prescribe. There was only one thing a man of action could do and Weary did it, but I reckon I won't tell you any more and spoil the surprise. You know the famous Flying U stories and you'll appreciate this typically clever and authentic Bower story.

The same is true of BAD NEVINS, the story by Charles Alden Seltzer. With all the best-selling Seltzer books, novelets and short stories published, BAD NEVINS is a vignette of especial interest. So for real collectors of Western fiction, the next issue of GIANT

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INSPECTOR MOON WON HIS BET AND THEN . . .

IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, H.H. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN . . .

. . . AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES

THAT EVENING

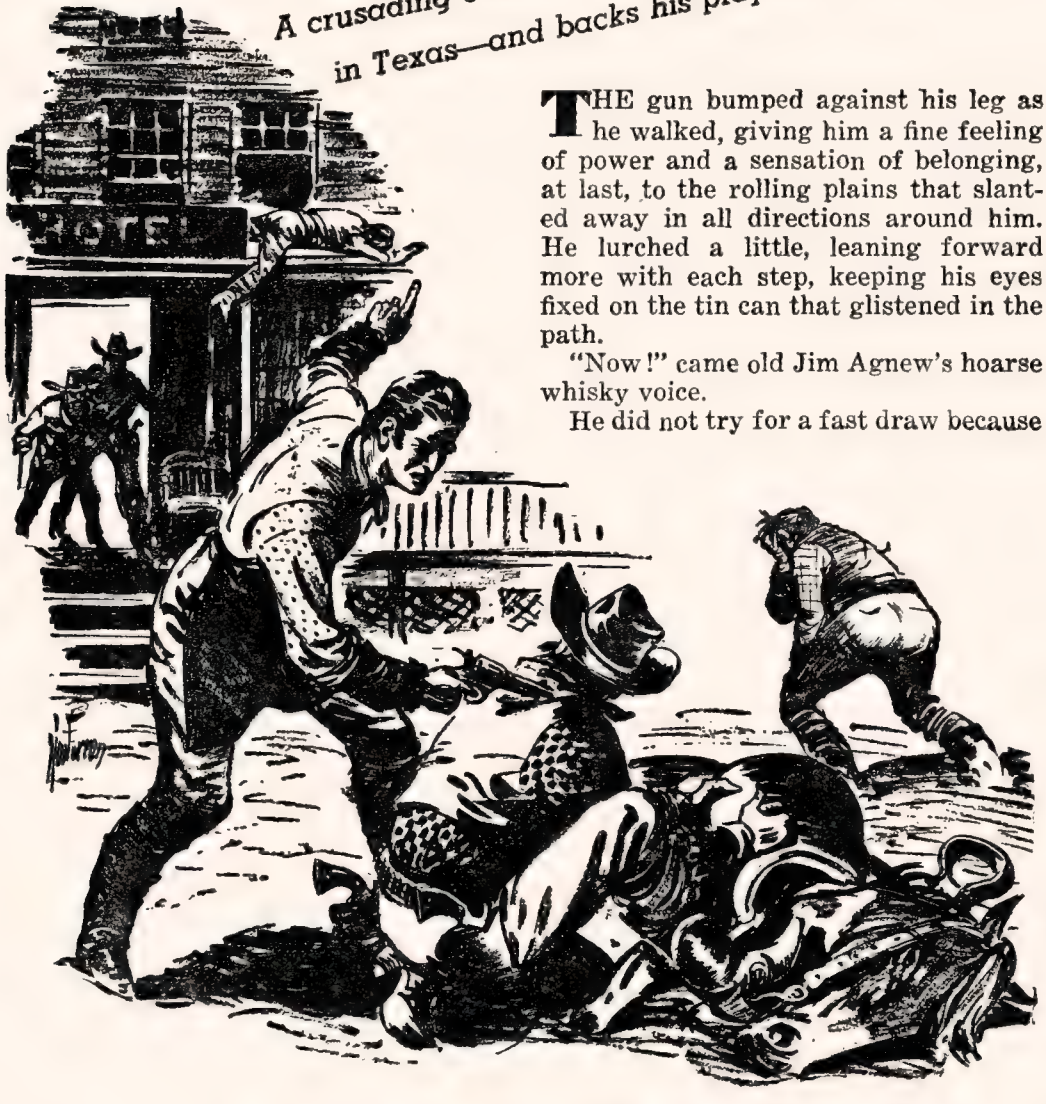
JUST IMAGINE! ME THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A REAL MYSTERY!
YES, AND WITH A DASH OF ROMANCE, IT'LL MAKE A GOOD YARN
HE'S WONDERFUL LOOKING

THIN GILLETTES GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT LOOK AS GOOD AS THEY FEEL. THAT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE KEENEST, SMOOTHEST-FINISHED EDGES OF ANY LOW-PRICED BLADE ON THE MARKET. WHAT'S MORE THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY AND PROTECT YOU FROM DISCOMFORT. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE

NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

SIGNAL GUNS at SUNUP

A crusading editor defies the most powerful interests in Texas—and backs his play with a six-shooter!



THE gun bumped against his leg as he walked, giving him a fine feeling of power and a sensation of belonging, at last, to the rolling plains that slanted away in all directions around him. He lurched a little, leaning forward more with each step, keeping his eyes fixed on the tin can that glistened in the path.

"Now!" came old Jim Agnew's hoarse whisky voice.

He did not try for a fast draw because

A Novel by JOHN JO CARPENTER

old Jim had warned him against hard trying, which tightened both nerves and muscles and created losers. He dipped out the old, dully gleaming .44 and fired, not quite from the hip, not quite from eye level. Old Jim had said, "When you point your finger at someone, you point straight. Aim a gun like you was pointin' your finger."

He pointed it like a finger and fired five times, saving the sixth and last as a "happenable." Old Jim had warned him about happenables, too. A man got mad or excited and kept blasting away after his enemy was dead, until his gun was empty. Then somebody else popped up, burning with the same blind kill-craze, and the one slug needed for him was gone. That was a "happenable."

He did not hit the can but he sprinkled it with gravel, from three shots that hit less than six inches away.

He put the gun back in the holster without reloading and looked at old Jim.

"How did I do today?"

JIM had a bulky, misshapen body. His legs were crooked by too many years on a horse and his torso had fat on it from too many years slouching and loafing and drinking.

His eyes were shifty, rheumy, water blue. He needed a shave, and his lips and chin trembled.

"You're gettin' it, Ben," Old Jim said. "Shootin' at a target on the ground is harder than hittin' a standin' man, where you fire at your own level. You ain't ever goin' to be fast, Ben, but you're quick—you're all-fired quick by nature—and you'll do. Don't let anythin' or anybody rush you gettin' your hand on that weapon—and get it on there right! When that gun's in your hand solid, then's the time to hurry."

"I see." Ben looked at the tin can disappointedly. "About thirty-five feet, I'd say. I still can't get used to such short range. Why don't we lengthen it."

But the veteran gunman shook his head vigorously.

"No. No!" Old Jim declared firmly. "No hand weapon, forty-four or forty-five, is accurate to the full length of its hittin' power. Learn to center your fire—to hit what you shoot at with one particular gun. Then stretch your range, Ben, a foot or two at a time. You don't have to hit a man dead center. How many deer you ever seen hit in the heart? Any place will do—chest or stomach will kill, legs or shoulder will knock a man down. Personally, I favor a forty-five, but that model forty-four's a nice gun, too. And if you load your own cartridges, you can give 'em the hittin' power of a store-bought forty-five. You do it the way I show you, Ben."

"I see."

Ben stood there in the path a moment, listening to the old man's earnest voice, nodding slightly, storing away Jim's words for digestion later, like a cow that eats by day and chews by night. He was a man of average height, a little under average weight, dark-skinned, dark-haired, smooth-shaven, neatly dressed. Not just his crisp pronunciation of words, but the very choice of the words themselves, announced that he came from the East, from the Yankee seaboard somewhere.

"I'll show you how to load your own some day," Old Jim went on. "Everything's gettin' to be rimfire and loadin' rimfire is a cinch. Now go back and walk toward the can and let's see you hit it this time."

BEN looked at his watch again. "I'm afraid I can't today, Jim. I'm late already. Some other time."

Jim looked at him pleadingly. "You—you can't spare me a little money today, Ben?"

"I don't see why not. Four bits?"

"Well," Jim said, gulping, "a dollar and a half's about what I need to take care of my necessaries."

"I can spare a dollar, and if you come around in a day or so you can have the other fifty cents."

Old Jim snatched at the silver coin. "Thanks, Ben. Thankee! That's white of you—mighty white!"

He had been a big, hulking man with

a bear's strength, the quick, savage, decisive coolness of a panther, in his day. But that was twenty years ago, in the late 'sixties, when Jim Agnew's name had meant something down in the Brazos country. The Brazos wasn't civilized then. Men hung *out* there who would have been hung *up* in any other

BEN LOVEJOY

part of Texas, and old Jim had taken sass from none of them.

But liquor had made a weak man out of a bad one; Jim had been tamed before the Brazos was, and he was a standing joke in Sunup. The Sunup younkers hooted at him as he lurched down the street, crying and singing maudlin trail-songs or talking to himself; they called him, derisively, "Old Couple of Guns," or "Two-jug man."

He lived in a little tar-paper shanty in Mexican Town, at the edge of Sunup, and what he lived on, outside of Musky Miller's bad whisky bought with Ben Lovejoy's occasional money gifts, no one knew.

But Senator Clyde Gilmer, born and raised here in Frohler County, had a memory that went back to Jim's Brazos days. Frohler County and Sunup, the county seat, were a long way from the Brazos, yet Clyde, as a young man, had heard of Jim's exploits. It was Clyde Gilmer who told Ben, "If you want to learn to defend yourself with a six-gun, Ben, see old Jim. Give him a dollar now and then and let him show you the tricks. Hard cash will help him remember what the whisky helped him forget."

Ben's .44 was old. Senator Gilmer had given it to him. It had belonged to a post office robber killed ten or twelve years ago in the brush up on the South Mesa. The holster was new, of hand-tooled Mexican workmanship. Ben was dressy; he liked good cravats and he kept the crease in his pants and he had brought to Texas his Vermont habit of a nightly bath.

YET he still felt embarrassed to be seen wearing a gun in public, and went down the path toward town, carrying the gun in his hand with the holster belt rolled around it. Pretty soon he came to a house, and then another one. Leaving Mexican Town and its thatched shanties behind, he reached Sunup, which had a main street, parallel street, and four intersecting ones. The Morning Flyer of the Pueblo, Dallas and Rio Valley Railway was just whistling through Sunup as Ben reached the main street.

Ten years ago Sunup was a trading post without even regular stage service, and a population (not counting Mexicans) of fifty to eighty, depending upon the season. Now eight hundred people called it home, and the county offices had been moved from Frohler to Sunup, and it took six hundred acres of cattle pens to load the grass-fat cattle shipped out of here on the P. D. & R. V.

Men said, "Hi, Ben," or "Howdy there!" as he walked, and he made no attempt to sound like a Texan as he answered them crisply, "Good morning." He had made friends in his year here. He had got back his health and lost his cough. He had not used up too much of his savings and had prospects of making

money. He had never pretended to be anything but what he was.

He stopped in front of a single small frame building in the center of Main Street and put his key in the padlock of the door. South of the building was an empty space and then the blacksmith shop run by Dorcas Wintergreen, who had been brought to Texas as a Gilmer slave and who remained a free man but still devoted to Gilmers. North of the building was a community hitch-lot, with a horse trough and a wagon shed.

On the single large front window of the building was the painted legend:

SUNUP WEEKLY SIGNAL
Ben Lovejoy, Editor
Publisher
"Covers Frohler County Like The Dew"

The lock clicked open after the usual stubborn tussle and he went inside, smelling paper and dust and printer's ink—odors he had known since boyhood, odors he had smelled in a hundred print shops all over the East and South. He rolled up the shade and sat down at his

big roll-top desk, which was located so he could look out of the window as he worked. He opened the top, right-hand drawer of his desk and laid the gun, still with the belt wrapped around it, in the empty space there. For the hundredth time he looked at the frayed, unsigned letter pasted in the bottom of the drawer:

This is fair warnin. We don't need no newspaper if its agonna take the railroad side in our troubles. You had your chanst to be for the people. You let the railroad buy you out. You

dont decerv fair warnin but even a rattlesnake rattles befour it strikes. Well this is our rattle, if you think your crook railroad friends can push out people that made this country guess again, tar and feathers is what you need or a rope, and fool around with Gilmer and that's what youall get.

Ben Lovejoy was thirty-one and he had been a printer for fifteen years, a true "journeyman," working in this shop a while, owning that paper a while, always on the move.

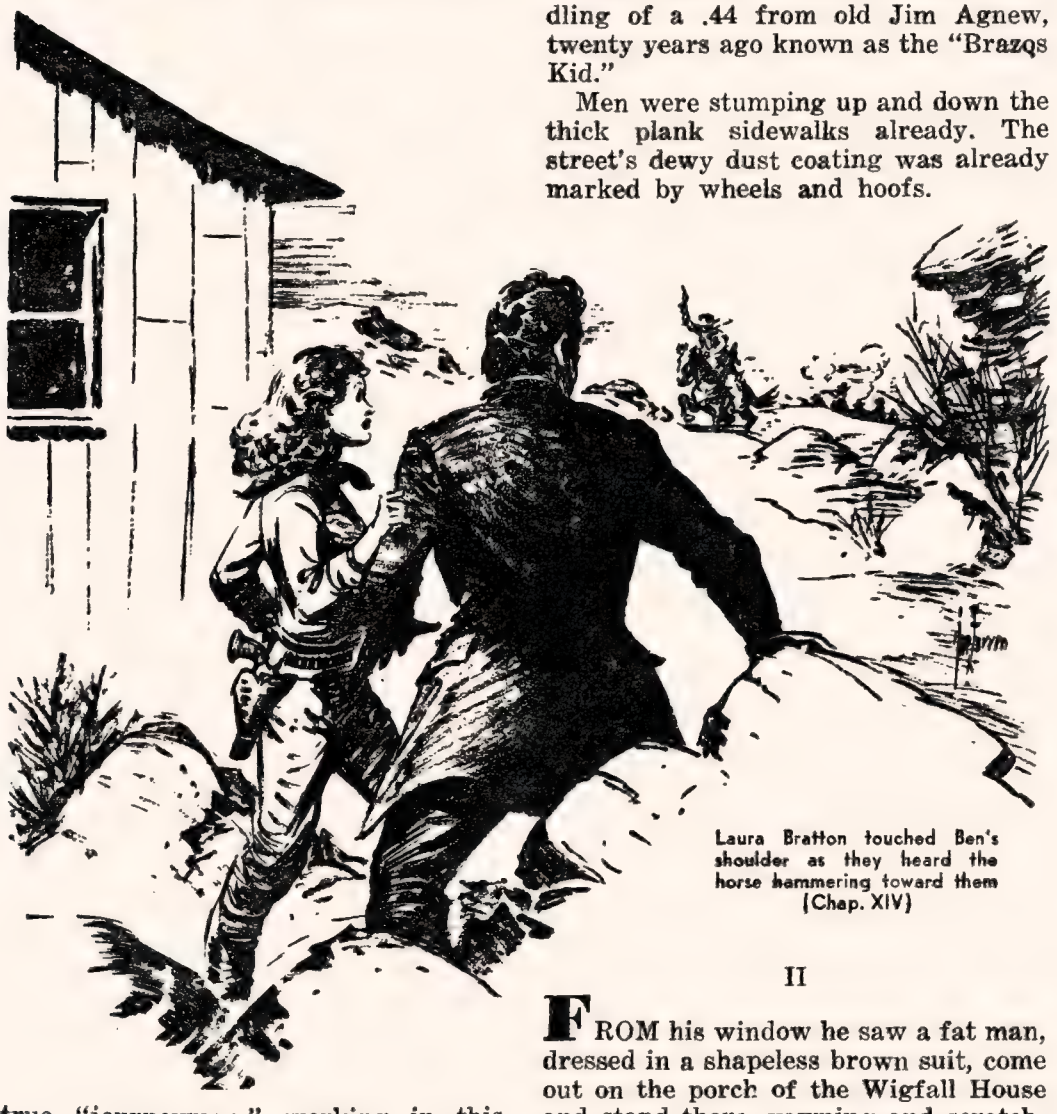
His father before him had been a printer—a hard drinker, too, which was the reason why Ben rarely touched the "hard stuff."

Ben's father had been dead for almost all of the fifteen years.

He couldn't remember his mother. He had made a home for his sister, Betty, wherever he worked. He had brought her to Texas with him a year ago, when his health failed.

He had received other threatening letters. For this reason he had started to take lessons in quick, accurate handling of a .44 from old Jim Agnew, twenty years ago known as the "Brazos Kid."

Men were stumping up and down the thick plank sidewalks already. The street's dewy dust coating was already marked by wheels and hoofs.



Laura Bratton touched Ben's shoulder as they heard the horse hammering toward them (Chap. XIV)

II

FROM his window he saw a fat man, dressed in a shapeless brown suit, come out on the porch of the Wigfall House and stand there, yawning and scratching and picking his teeth. No one spoke to him but the fat man neither noticed nor cared. He came down the steps and crossed the street, narrowly missing being trampled under the hoofs of a spotted paint horse. The man on the horse cursed the fat man with hilarious vigor but the fat man, his face creased

in apologetic smiles, merely shook some of the dust out of his clothes and continued on his way.

In a moment Ben heard him at the door. He came in and laid a well-thumbed card on Ben's roll-top desk. Ben already knew who the man was but he studied the card anyway. It identified the fat man as William W. Collander, General Sales Agent for the Sunup Land & Water Company.

"How do you do, Mr. Collander," Ben said, rising to take the limp, plump, moist hand. "I've heard of you I've been expecting you."

"Hi," the fat man said, measuring Ben with an unexpectedly cool, wise, watchful look. "Take a chair, if you don't mind. I pretty near got stepped on by that spotted horse. I always do the wrong thing around animals—always gettin' bit by dogs or kicked by horses."

Always doing the wrong thing around people, too, Ben thought.

He knew all about William W. Collander. Ask anybody in this part of Texas about "Windmill" Collander and men would spit in the dust and use words not used lightly here. His first venture into the state had been as advance man for a promotion scheme to sell windmills on a cut-rate, stock-share basis—buy five shares of stock at ten dollars and you not only get dividends, sir, but you get your windmill at wholesale. Over a thousand men put money into it. "All this country needs," men said then, "is water and a few good people." The classic reply, "That's all Hell needs, too," had not yet been coined.

Not a single windmill had ever been manufactured. The three top officers of the country fled to Nicaragua, where there was no extradition treaty. Water-hungry Texas cattlemen swallowed their pride and wrote off their losses. Windmill Collander let them get over their temper before he came back to Texas.

But he was back now, free to travel everywhere with his furtive, knowing look, his ever-ready pad of U. S. banknotes, his gentle, wheezing voice. Ben knew politicians, and of this breed, he knew railroad politicians best. He did not like Windmill Collander but he was a newspaper man, and he worked with the materials the Lord and the political system provided him.

"Looks like another hot day," Windmill wheezed.

"Yes indeed."

"Learnin' to carry a gun, I hear." Windmill patted his armpit. "I carry one up here. Little double-barreled thirty-two in a spring clip holster I invented myself. One touch of the thumb and it's in your hand. Look."

His fleshy hand slid under his coat and came out with the gun.

"Had it made by the best gunsmith in the East—tailor-made, a hundred and seventy-five dollars. I sleep with that gun, yet I ain't never fired it since it left the shop. Now how do you like that?"

"Very interesting."

"I'm a man who is always ready for anything that happens."

"I find that's the way to live long," Ben said.

"Good, good! If you got time, I'd like to talk business with you."

THE preliminaries, the small talk, the feeling-out, were over. They had sized each other up while they talked about guns.

"I want to give Senator Gilmer a little support in his campaign. Gilmer's a good man and he's going to have his work cut out for him to get back in," Windmill said.

"I think the *Signal* will support him, too," Ben said.

"Glad to hear it. Who is this feller, Carl Meehan, who's filed against him?"

"I don't know much about him. He works as a foreman on a cattle place east of town—in Frohler County, though. Owns a little property of his own down on the South Mesa but it's leased, I understand. Single man, not much education, came here as a floating cowhand with the late Joe Bratton and settled down. Native of Arkansas, I believe. Doesn't have much chance, in my estimation."

"Don't you take too much for grant-

ed!" Windmill cried. "What kind of a geezer is he personally? Hear he's a scrapper—hard fist-fighter, bad with a gun."

"I don't know much about him."

"I thought he went out with your sister!"

Ben leaned across the desk and said sharply, "You thought wrong. Meehan has been at my house a time or two but there has already been too much gossip about him and I do not permit talk of that kind to be associated with my own family. Is that clear?"

"Sure, sure!" Windmill said hastily. "All right, all right, *all right!*" He seemed to regret having stirred up a storm. "My information is he'll give Gilmer a race of it, especially with the Germans down on the South Mesa. Those Dutchies always been Republicans since before the war, but they're a-turnin' Democrat by dozens to nominate Meehan. It's smart politics, Lovejoy."

"You may be right," Ben admitted.

"You bet I'm right! Now—what kind of a deal you want, to come out strong for Gilmer and the Gilmer Bill?"

"I told Gilmer. I want a written order from the Sunup Land and Water Company for fifty column inches of farm and ranch advertisements every week. I want a written order for two thousand copies, to be delivered either to their office here or to the railroad station. I want an understanding that the *Signal* will be circulated throughout Texas and in the East as the principal advertising medium for land in this area. In other words, most of all I want to establish the *Signal* as a state-wide paper."

"Oh no! Oh no! We can't stand for no such arrangement," Windmill protested. "I would a whole lot rather just peel off some cash—say a thousand dollars. How's that sound to you?"

"No good. You can't buy the paper."

"Now look here—" Windmill began stridently.

Ben leaned across the desk and said, "Once more, Mr. Collander, and then maybe we'll understand each other. You can't buy my support. I had already made up my mind to support Senator Gilmer and the Gilmer Bill. You have the same policy. You're going to have to have a medium to get that policy before the people and you're going to have to have a medium to advertise the land you've got for sale. We can get together that way or not at all."

"My company—"

"Just a minute. I'm not through. If your company will buy the advertising and the copies of the paper, I can give Senator Gilmer considerable space, lots of support. If they don't, all I can spare is a few column inches each week. If I've got to trim my sails financially, I'm going to have to depend on local circulation—Meehan's friends, Gilmer's enemies. I'm going to have to play fair and give Meehan equal space. Get it? I can show you my books to *prove* I need Meehan circulation to pull this paper out of the red."

WINDMILL sat there licking his lips, thinking it over. He understood, all right. Windmill was a practical man and Ben was making practical talk.

"I ain't sure I got the authority," Windmill mused.

"You've got the authority, all right! Here are the two orders, all prepared—one for the advertising space, one for the two thousand copies. I can wire to Houston this afternoon and have paper here within a week. I've got enough for two thousand extra copies for the next two issues."

A sharp rap sounded on the window. Collander jumped. Ben turned slowly, saying out of the corner of his mouth, "Speak of the devil! Here's Meehan now."

Carl Meehan was a tall man, one who walked with the suggestion of a stoop. He might have been thirty or he might have been as much as five years younger or older—there was no way Ben could tell. He was darker than Ben, with a heavy mane of black hair that might mean a streak of Indian. Yet, unlike an Indian, he had a heavy blue-black beard that seemed to be sprouting two hours after he shaved, and his eyebrows were heavy, bushy black screens over snap-

ping black eyes. He had big features—a strong nose, a big chin with a cleft in it, a long upper lip with a close-clipped mustache.

"Busy, Ben?" he called, through the glass. When Ben nodded brusquely, Meehan said, "I'll be back later, then. Want to make medicine with you—palaver—talky-talk. Private."

His dark face lighted with a grin and he went thumping off down the street on his runover boots.

"And you say that man ain't dangergerous," Collander breathed. "Don't low-rate that kind of a man in this country. Maybe you know your business, Mr. Lovejoy, but I know Texas and Texas people."

Other boots sounded, and two men went past their window. Ben said, "Two more hands from the Etcetera—that's where Meehan works. Now what do they want in town at this hour?" He got up and went to the window, just as a single shot cracked flatly across the street.

The Wigfall House was a three-story building of pine boards, with an office and a saloon and a slightly clandestine gambling casino on the street floor and twenty sleeping rooms on each of the floors above.

Carl Meehan was nowhere in sight, but six ponies were clustered with their heads together in front of the Wigfall House. They were not tied. A single man held the reins of all six, and every horse wore the peculiar Etcetera brand:

&c.

The two men who had just passed Ben's window shot across the street, kicking up billows of dust. A short youth, not more than seventeen or eighteen, came out of the saloon entrance of the Wigfall. He was running backward with a high-kneed, awkward step, whirling his arms to keep balance. He felt off the porch and lit flat, splashing dust. The six horses reared. The man holding them yelled.

The short youth bounced to his feet and charged at the saloon door again. Another shot crackled and Seth Nennet, the Wigfall bartender and brother of Roy Nennet, its owner, showed briefly in the doorway. He held his little .32 in both hands and fired into the ground. The gun cracked again and the Etcetera boy jumped as it bit at his feet. He screamed a name and Seth disappeared.

The three other Etcetera men smashed through the batwing doors after the boy. The man holding the horses put all the reins in one hand and covered the door with his .45.

"I've been expecting this," Ben murmured. He looked around for Windmill Collander. The fat man had retreated to the dark rear of the print shop.

"Too rich for my blood—I can talk to you some other time," he quavered, groping for the back door.

BEN caught him just as a .45 boomed across the street. "Some other time may be too late. I've got to have that order today. You sign or you don't need to come back."

"I ain't sure I got the authority."

"I'll take that chance."

Somebody began screaming across the street—a man's voice, but high-pitched with terror. Windmill moaned as he ran back to the desk. He scrawled *W. W. Collander* at the bottom of each order. One moment he was there writing—the next he was flitting out the back door with surprising speed.

The whole street seemed to have exploded. Ben, at his window, admired the Etcetera sense of strategy. There was no sign of Carl Meehan. Three men had plunged into the saloon behind the youth. Three more now watched, guns drawn, on the porch. Then a man on a paint horse—the one that had almost stepped on Windmill—loped down the street.

Old Dorcas Wintergreen popped out of his blacksmith shop, a tiny .22 rifle in his huge black hands. Dorcas was a good shot at snipe, but he had never pulled a gun on "white folks" and his arm trembled. The man on the paint shouted, and the .22 swiveled toward him, crackling. The man on the paint held up his arm and began swearing as

"Up in that saddle!" ordered Clip. "You two will have to ride double!" (Chap. XIII)

Ben stepped outside the door. The little .22 slug had gone through the flesh of his forearm.

"What you want to mix in for, Dorcas?" he shouted, in a flat Ozark twang. "I ought to let a little air into that wooly skull."

"You stay out of my shop!" Dorcas howled back. "Ain't no Missouri hillbilly tell me off."

"You give me that little gun!" the Missourian commanded, grinning. "You ain't to be trusted with it nohow."

Dorcas handed up the .22 and the Missourian, paying no attention to his wound, spurred across the street, whooping, "They turned long guns on us, boys. See what I caught myself, Shorty!"

Etcetera men boiled out of the saloon in a mass, dragging a taut rope. Ben's skin crawled as he saw what was on the end of it.

No one liked Roy Nennet, but for mild old Seth there was only affection. It was Seth they were dragging. The short youth handed the rope up to the man on the paint.

"Take him for a ride, Clip!"

Ben darted back and grabbed the .44 from his desk. But he dropped it back in again. They had made Dorcas and his .22 look foolish—what would they do to him? He watched from the door.

The Missourian dallied the rope around his saddle horn and the paint pranced down the street. The loop had Seth's arms pinned to his sides. He staggered as the paint danced. He kept his feet for a rod or more and then fell. Somehow he got to his knees and walked on them. Somehow he got up, ran a few more steps, and fell in the dust again.

The Missourian touched the paint with his spurs. It jumped and old Seth jumped with it like a fish on the end of a line.

It was the Missourian who saw Roy Nennet first. The Missourian jumped off and grabbed his bridle as the paint reared. Roy was in the second story window of the hotel with a .30-30 rifle. He fired once. The pony screamed and jumped. Ben saw, sickeningly, that the .30-30 slug had gone through it. Blood bubbled from its nostrils as the Missourian fought to control it.

"Hold it, you fool!" he roared. "He'll drag your brother to death!" He was crazy with anger, rather than fear, as he fought the maddened horse. "Put up that gun, Roy, you fool!"

Old Seth screamed at his brother as the rope jerked him down again. Roy coolly leveled the .30-30 and pressed the trigger again, and the paint plunged to its knees, kicking.

"How in hell do you work this toy?" the short youth cried. He swung the little .22 upward and fired. Roy Nennet's face changed. A little black spot appeared beside his nose. The .30-30 slipped from his hands and clanged on the tin roof of the porch.

Then, as the Missourian still fought the wounded horse noisily, Roy slumped forward in complete silence and crashed on the porch roof. He was dead before he hit, and he lay still, with one foot dangling over. The Missourian got his .45 out and shot the paint between the eyes. It coughed and jerked and stretched out stiffly.

In a minute the dust settled, and there was no more noise.

III

BEN suddenly discovered he had thrown up his breakfast. He had seen dead men before, had seen one or two killed. But there was something horrid in the way Roy Nennet died. He had stood there in his own window, firing at a horse, and a rowdy boy with a tiny rifle had killed him.

Even Seth seemed more worried about himself than about Roy. He staggered to his feet and the Missourian flipped the loop off. Seth staggered still worse as he groped toward the porch.

"Nobody's got anything against you, Seth," the Missourian said. "It was just that rotten Roy, and he won't cause no more trouble."

"Is he dead?" Seth asked, and the kid with the .22, white around the lips now, answered, "I reckon so. If the gun didn't

get him, the fall did. I didn't go to kill him, Seth."

"Shut up," the Missourian said gently, and the kid shut up. "Come on, you rannies. This ought to show 'em they can't push the Etcetera around. Let's ride!"

Ben, still light-headed with nausea, found himself jerking the .44 out of the drawer again. He shook off the holster and carried the naked gun into the street. The tobacco-chewing Missourian was stripping saddle and bridle from the dead paint. Ben touched his shoulder with the gun, and the Missourian turned his beefy, sweaty brown face toward him.

"Who let you out with a gun, sonny?"

"It's the newspaper feller—watch him!" the short youth warned.

"You left a dead man up there," Ben choked, prodding him with the .44. "The least you can do is help get the body down."

"Roy can stay up there for the birds to pick, for all of me," the Missourian drawled. "And be careful of that gun."

Ben stepped backward, leveling the .44. The Missourian grinned and took a step toward him, and Ben remembered old Jim advising him never to let a strong man get close enough to grab. But he could not make himself pull the trigger. He thumbed back the hammer and there it stuck, while the Missourian followed him, grinning and wiping the blood from his wounded arm on the front of his shirt.

"You forgot to load that thing," the Missourian said. "You got just one slug left in there, my short-haired friend. When that's gone, what'll you do? Put that iron up before I shove it down your throat and kick the handle off. You might hurt yourself."

He turned his back contemptuously. Ben lowered the gun. The Missourian tossed his saddle and bridle to another rider, and swung up behind the short youth who had shot Roy. He spat a big puddle of tobacco juice into the dust.

"Mr. Lovejoy," he said, "I hear you're strong for law and order. Personally, I don't give a hang. My name's Clip Foshay and I take care of myself. But we come to town peaceable and that dang fool Seth drawed on Short with a thirty-two. Seems they got a new rule—Etcetera men can't drink in Sunup unless there's two men on duty behind the bar. You get that? Two men, or we can't be served! We're on the Injur list."

"You helped things a lot," Ben choked.

Clip Foshay grinned. "Roy Nennet won't make no more fool regulations, anyway."

"Next time," Ben told him, "I'll shoot."

Clip studied him. "I believe you would, at that," he marveled. "Listen, Mr. Newspaper Man—if you ever pull a gun on me again, you'll be the deadest boy your mammy ever mourned. Let's get out of here, Short."

They made the dust fly as they thundered down the street, turning toward the east hills.

"Let's get Roy's body down, Seth," Ben said. "Give us a hand, Dorcas."

"They lay off of you!" Dorcas admired him. As a rule he had no use for a Northerner, but there was respect in his voice now. "They talk big, but they scared of you, Mr. Ben. You wait here and I shinny up after Roy. I expect I the strongest."

OLD DORCAS lowered Roy's body, and Ben and Seth carried it into the saloon. People who had kept out of sight while the Etcetera gang was in town flocked to the saloon now. Old and young, white, brown and black, men and women, all came to see the dead man. They walked past Roy wordlessly, marveling at all the big guns he had faced, to be stricken down by a .22. Seth kept saying, "Roy made that rule. I didn't. His blood's on his own head."

Ben remembered Betty. He hurried back to his office and wrote a note to her:

Sister:—Nothing to worry about. Lunch as usual.—Ben

"Frank!" He whistled, and the Mexican boy who ran his errands popped through the back door. "Run this up

to the house, *muy pronto.*"

"*Si.*" Frank grinned and vanished.

Ben's job was to get out a newspaper. He set grimly to work. He heard them drag the dead paint horse away. He saw the crowd follow Sheriff Hamp Smith, who arrived on the scene too late, as usual. And Ben went on working.

It was eleven forty-five when he locked up and headed toward home. Betty would be worried, but he stopped at the Wigfall House for a last drink. Old Dorcas, the only colored man allowed to drink at the white men's bar, came up and said, "I like to buy you a drink, Mr. Ben. Them Etcetera trash surely did back down from you. Mr. Ben, you are really Texas *folks* now."

"Here's to you," Ben said.

As he left the saloon, a huge, lumbering pillar of a man came out of the other door, which led to the hotel lobby, and fell into step beside him.

"Howdy, Ben. Been lookin' for you."

"Hello, Senator. Join me for some lunch at home?"

"Can't. Eat at the Wigfall with me."

Ben made a face. "I'm not that hungry. I've eaten there before."

"Then I'll walk a piece with you."

"Looks like another nice, hot day."

"You ain't got grass and cattle worries, or you wouldn't say nice, boy."

Senator Clyde Gilmer's grammar was good enough, when he wanted it to be. There were really two Gilmers—one, the rough, bluff, hard-talking, hard-riding Native Son cattleman; the other, the dignified Senator he suddenly became away from Sunup.

Gilmer stood almost six feet, six inches tall. He weighed two hundred and thirty pounds and did not look his sixty years. He was that rarity, a native Texan. "It was against the law for me to be born here," he said proudly. "Texas was Mexican country then—no *Americanos* allowed. I came in a-howlin'."

He had served in the Confederate Army. He was the only Texan on the Board of Directors of the P. D. & R. V. railway. This was his third term in the State Senate. Handsome as he was big, few men had as many friends.

No one knew how rich Gilmer was. His Circle G had gobbled up twenty-five smaller outfits in ten years, by actual count. He was president, some said actual owner, of the Sunup's National Bank. He owned most of the business property on Sunup's main street. The house Ben Lovejoy and his sister occupied belonged to him.

"You seen Meehan's boys shoot up the town this morning, Ben?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Roy always was a fool. I suppose you know why they went after his scalp?"

"Because he made some kind of a special drinking rule."

"Ha!" the Senator snorted. "I happen to know otherwise. I happen to know Carl Meehan sicked 'em on because Roy made a remark about Meehan and Laura Bratton."

"I'll ignore that, Senator, if you don't mind," Ben said brusquely. "I don't listen to gossip."

GILMER colored, glaring at him. "Gossip? I'll give you the facts. Laura's a young, good-looking woman. That property of hers is worth a lot. It's two years since her husband was murdered, and Carl has been runnin' her place for her. They're a standoffish bunch. Ben, there's not a woman in Frohler County that would speak to her on the street—and you know that women know the truth about those things."

"Women," Ben said acidly, "are as tolerant as wildcats."

"Oh, bosh!" The Senator gave up. "Windmill Collander," he grunted, "said you was going to help me in the election. Now you won't listen to the truth about my opponent."

"Gossip's a double-edged weapon," Ben said. "It usually works both ways—and I don't like it anyway. I want some political facts. What about the Gilmer Bill? What about the scrip question? What about the right-of-way condemnations for the railroad? People seem to have an idea that Meehan speaks for them, and you speak for the railroad."

"That's a damnable lie!"

"But it's what they're saying." They plodded up the hot street in silence. "Senator, I've been through a number of campaigns. Let me make a suggestion. Quit worrying about Meehan's relations with his lady boss and start thinking about what happened this morning. I saw murder committed, but I haven't seen anyone try to bring in the murderer."

"You mean arrest the runt who shot Roy—bring him to trial?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be blasted!" Gilmer shook his head wonderingly. "You sure ain't learned much in a year in Texas. There ain't twelve men in the county who would vote to convict a yellow dog for killin' Roy! Why, you couldn't even lay hands on Shorty. They'd pass him from hand to hand, from house to house, and lie like gentlemen and laugh in your face while they did it! Why Ben, that wasn't a *tryin'* matter—that was a private killin'!"

"I see, I see!"

And Ben thought he did see; the same laws meant two different things, in Texas and the Eastern states. In the East, a drop of violently shed blood started the whole complex machine of the law to grinding. Here, a dead man could not budge it.

"Then maybe," he went on, "I can see a way to make the *Signal* useful. Well, Senator, I've got to hurry."

"I won't hold you, son."

Gilmer clapped his shoulder, and Ben hurried on to the big, two-story house among the tamaracks. Going up the walk, he saw sign where a horse had stood at the hitch-rack. He crossed the wide, cool veranda and entered the big living room. This was a homey touch of Vermont, where hot, dry, endless Texas Panhandle plains were walled out.

He could hear Betty singing in the kitchen, with a happy bubble in her voice. He walked in and saw her at the stove, and she looked different, somehow. Like Ben, Betty was of average height. She was trimly built but otherwise not distinguished. In fact, Ben had always thought her rather plain.

Amazingly, he now saw a pretty woman, with bright eyes and red cheeks, and brown curls worn some new way. She did not seem to notice his stare, but greeted him with absent gaiety.

"Did you get my note, Betty?" he asked her quietly.

"Yes. I didn't understand it."

"You didn't?" He cocked his head. "A man was murdered in front of my office, the whole town reeked of gunsmoke. There was enough gunfire to startle Gabriel into blowing his horn—and you don't understand my little note."

"Oh! That! Why, I heard the—*murdered,* you say?" Her dreamy look vanished. "Ben, you're angry and upset about something. Have I done something wrong?"

She came toward him and he held his ground.

"I suppose you have no news of your own to give me."

She knew what he meant, and turned pink.

"Wh-why, Mr. Meehan was here a few minutes."

"A few minutes? By the looks of the tracks at the hitch-post, it must have been longer. Hours, probably. Perhaps it only *seemed* like a few minutes to you."

As she turned white, he went on between his teeth, "I'll be hanged if I don't think you're in love with him! His men were down there killing Roy Nennet while he was up here making love to you. Betty, what's come over you?"

He thought she might faint. He jumped and caught her under the arms, and she leaned against him and sobbed hysterically. He had never heard her cry this way—did not think her cool body held this much passion.

"Well," he said, "are you or aren't you in love with him? Crying won't help, Betty. Spit it out!"

"Oh, Ben," she moaned, "I am in love with him—terribly, terribly! You've got to help me. You've got to let me marry him because it's the only thing in the world I ever really wanted."

"Betty!" He led her to a chair by the

table and made her sit down. He stood there studying her, wondering if this fiery, broken, impulsive woman could really be his sister. "I doubt if you've really thought about it, but let's talk as we eat. You—you rather bowl me over."

IV

HER eyes followed him pathetically as he went to the sink, pumped water out of the little pitcher pump, washed himself thoroughly. Silently she put their lunch on the table. They sat down. He bowed his head and intoned, "Dear Lord, for this share of Thy bounty, so much more than we really deserve, help us to be more worthy and in this poor fashion accept our thanks. Amen. Now, Betty, a muffin please."

She handed him the plate and shook her head when he would have handed it back.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" She shook her head. He put a muffin on her plate. "Eat." She began nibbling obediently, as he studied this stranger who had been born of his own father and mother. "Now we can be sensible."

"I guess I'm not sensible," she said tremulously.

"Hardly. I think I have made it clear what I thought about Carl Meehan. You know I intended to oppose him in this senatorial campaign. Now I find you not only see him while I'm absent, but you actually request permission to marry him."

She nodded, and he groped for words. If she had cried then, he knew he would have patted her shoulder and said, "Go right ahead and marry him," because he had never been able to withstand his sister's tears. She was all he had. But she did not cry, and he tried to think clearly what was best for her.

"Mrs. Carl Meehan," he said, making his voice hard. "It sounds interesting. But you've seen these places they call two-bit spreads. A clapboard shanty, weatherstripped to keep out only the worst of the weather. No plaster or siding, no wallpaper, usually no floor; no fences or flowers, only what garden a woman can water between annual babies. A few wild steers for your wealth —sagebrush growing up to your very door—tumbleweeds piled to the eaves on the windward side of your house—two sorebacked horses to drive to town on Saturdays to lay in new supplies of sowbelly bacon and beans. Mrs. Carl Meehan, Texas gentlewoman, two years from now "

"That's the way you see it?" She had flinched at first, but then her jaws clenched. "That's all you think I could be, as Mrs. Carl Meehan?"

"You probably wouldn't even have that," he snapped, losing his temper. "You might even have to share it with another woman."

She jumped up and snatched at her plate, and he chuckled inwardly with surprise at the thought she might actually throw it at him. . . . Betty throwing things! . . . But instead she sat down and began laughing, not hysterically.

"You mean Laura Bratton, of course."

"Is there still another one?"

"Oh, Ben!" She came around and took his face between her hands. "Ben, I've always been so afraid of you. You've always been so stern and right and just. Now I find you can be just as silly and stupid and wrong as common mortals."

He pushed her hands away. "In what way?"

"First, remember you're a newspaperman, and you want facts, not gossip," she said. "Joe Bratton and Carl Meehan were friends—sidekicks is the Texas term, I believe. They worked together on the Circle G, for your friend Senator Gilmer. Then Carl heard the railroad was coming through and he had a little money, which he used as a down payment on four thousand acres down on the South Mesa, among the Germans.

"Then Joe, who was still working for Gilmer, fell in love with Laura. I agree she was an orphan without family, perhaps without any social or educational advantages. She was a waitress in the Wigfall House and she could have married richer men—but she married Joe, and I might remind you that he had a

lot less then than Carl has now, and she didn't have to move into a shanty!"

BEN nodded. He was trying to be fair about this.

"I know. He borrowed money from the bank to buy a place."

"And the note has been paid!" she flared. "Eight months later, Joe was shot from behind, and Carl went over to help out his best friend's widow, as any gentleman would. Carl has run the Etcetera for her ever since. In a little over two years he has helped her increase it from a tiny little place to one of almost fifteen thousand acres. Certainly they're still in debt! But the cattle they bought for three dollars and twenty cents a head could be sold on the place for fifteen. And it's all Laura's! Carl's property is separate. It hasn't prospered so well because he has given most of his time to Laura. But he's not a poor man."

"Sit down. I can't talk this way."

"I'm glad to hear this background," he said. "However, bad talk does exist, and in a sense he comes here with his name compromised. In these circumstances, the least he could do is ask my permission."

"That would be droll. I'll tell him." She was actually smiling.

"Droll or not, if he's a man he'll do it. Betty, I could like Meehan personally. As a fishing companion—a drinking partner—a business associate—he would be admirable. It's as a brother-in-law that he sets my teeth on edge. Do you want to know what happened this morning, while he was up here with you?"

He told her about the death of Roy Nennet, and it angered him because she showed so little shock. She hadn't seen Roy tumble down with that hole in his head—she hadn't helped carry a body inside. No, Betty had been with a man she loved.

"Imagine! And they won't even prosecute!" was all she said.

He gave up and went back to the office. "You can't reason with a woman," he told himself, with a despairing chuckle, "but sometimes newspaper readers show better sense." He went directly to the type-case and began setting type, composing as he went along. This was his way of fighting. This was where he felt his power. Ideas were always more explosive weapons than guns.

He finished setting type, blocked it into a proof form, and rolled a galley proof. He read it with pleasure, deciding, "I'll throw this right on the front page, shock them awake!" It was an editorial that went like this:

THE LORD HELP TEXAS

Yesterday nine rowdies murdered Roy Nennet, a Sunup business man, in plain view of anyone who cared to watch.

The owner of this paper knows that "murdered" is libelous, but it is used deliberately, to see if Roy's killers have nerve enough to take it to court.

Certainly, it does not appear that they will ever get to court any other way, to judge by Sheriff Hamp Smith's behaviour so far.

Roy Nennet's MURDERERS were all employees of the Etcetera ranch, which is owned by a woman. This is not said in criticism of her, but to explain why they behave as they do. We

[*Turn page*]

fast HELP for HEADACHE
UPSET STOMACH - JUMPY NERVES

Today more people than ever before use Bromo-Seltzer, Because this time-proved product gives fast help. Not only for headache pain, but also for the upset stomach and jumpy nerves that often go with it.

Quick! Pleasant! Bromo-Seltzer effervesces with split-second action, ready to go to work at once. And it is so refreshing! You must be satisfied or your money back! Caution: Use only as directed.

Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drug store fountain or counter today. It's a product of the Emerson Drug Co. since 1887.

do not expect a woman can maintain a strong hand over a crew of MURDERERS.

However, the ranch has a general manager, Carl Meehan, who was in town while the MURDER was committed.

Meehan must have heard the shooting.

Why were so many MURDERERS in town?

We believe they came TO CAUSE TROUBLE! We believe Meehan and his MURDERERS want to show Frohler County they are too big and tough to oppose. They think Texas will follow that kind of leadership.

We don't.

We have seen Eastern elections stolen by force and violence. When we came here, we never expected to see a gang of MURDERERS intimidate a whole county with a long record of pioneer bravery.

Regardless of what our industrious Sheriff does—if he ever bestirs himself to do anything—we think the people of Frohler County have more sand than Meehan's MURDER-CREW give them credit for.

They don't want the boss of Roy Nennet's MURDERERS representing them in the legislative halls at Austin.

All it takes is nerve to keep this from happening.

If the people of Frohler County lack that nerve—then, THE LORD HELP TEXAS!

He read it over twice, heard footsteps, and saw Senator Gilmer come through the door with a sheaf of papers.

"Ben, here's the story on the railroad right-of-way and the scrip and the land cases. Newspaper feller down in Austin wrote it up for me for Senate speeches."

He laid the papers on Ben's desk. Ben silently handed him the proof of the editorial. Gilmer read it slowly.

"By gorrie! Whew! You're tough on poor old Hamp Smith. I don't know as I like this."

He read it again, slowly.

"I don't know," he said at the end. "I told you how people felt about Roy. But maybe you're right. Maybe you're right after all! This'll hit the nesters' wives, all the womenfolk, who're always strong for law and order."

OUT in the street a man yelled, "Whoa! Hold back there in the britchin', you jug-headed, burr-tailed, sheep-necked, bench-legged cayuse. Quit jackassin' around and back up—lay your weight in the britchin' and earn your keep. What kind of dray horse is it that won't back up?"

Old Berea Hyde, the P. D. & R. V. station agent, blind in one eye and one-legged, was trying to back a small spring-wagon up to the porch of the Wigfall House. On the porch four men sat on a plain pine coffin, smoking.

Berea hauled back on the lines again. One of the horses reared and fought. Old Seth Nennet stood up and motioned, and the four of them picked up Roy's coffin and carried it down to the wagon. They slid it over the end gate and Berea started the team toward the depot. Seth, without a backward glance, returned to the hotel. The other three men jumped in as the wagon rolled, sat down on the coffin and rolled fresh cigarettes.

"Now what the deuce!" Ben exclaimed.

"Roy said he wanted to be embalmed and buried in a regular cemetery, in his will. They got to ship him to Douglas, to the railroad division point, for that. He left everything he owned to Seth."

"You move fast in this country, don't you?"

The senator's blue eyes twinkled a little. "I see what you mean. Yes, I reckon we do hustle things along a little. But I said there wouldn't be any flowers wasted on Roy." He took another look at the editorial. "You ain't so slow yourself, Ben. Reckon this will kick the pitch-pot over on top of the coals."

He went to the window and stared after the retreating dray, the coffin, the dust-cloud that followed.

"So long, Roy!" he said. "Looks like you'll be a sight more useful in death than you ever were in life."

Ben did not know whether to laugh or swear.

V

ONCE more that day Ben saw old Berea Hyde. Having taken Roy Nennet for his last ride in Sunup, Berea came stumping in on his good leg and one wooden one, and laid a package on Ben's desk. He was a dirty, furtive little man; Ben found it hard to be civil.

"The Flyer throwed this off for you, Mr. Lovejoy."

The package was full of "copy" for several pages of ads. It meant, to Ben, that Windmill had come to Sunup pre-

pared to do business on Ben's own terms. It meant victory for himself, financial success for the *Signal*. He smiled as he read over the ads, and their description of the desolate, sun-baked mesa:

WEALTH AWAITS on 1475 acre, 3-rm. house; well, tree windbrk, pole corrals, barn, ry, range subj. to cheap lease. Fnst cattle cntry in wld, low tax, sunny climate, what more do you want? Grow up with Texas! Terms. See Sunup Land & Water Co., Sunup, Tex., D. W. Collander, Genl. Agt.

Ben knew something about these deals. The railway owned thousands of acres, acquired by grant from the legislature. The Gilmer Bill, Ben knew vaguely, was written to iron out the legality of this grant.

The railway's policy was to sell the land off in small ranches, through the Sunup Land & Water Company. Once located on his new property, the immigrant usually found it could not support him. If he had money, he rented more range from the railway. If not, he forfeited his down payment and let the ranch go back to the land company.

Some properties had changed hands this way five or six times in three years, each owner adding a few improvements, until finally some buyer found it worth his money. A number of "distress" sellers had been taken over by the Etcetera, with money made during its first lucky boom year in cattle. Senator Gilmer, however, had refused to buy "distress" property. Whether it was fear of public opinion or an honest desire to avoid trafficking in the bad luck of others, Ben did not know. Meehan had said frankly, "We'll pay the best price we can but the railroad has made this a dog-eat-dog deal, and we're takin' a mouthful while they get a meal."

All of this was in Ben's mind as he studied the ads Collander had sent him. He reached for the telegram he had prepared so long ago—the one ordering extra paper so he could meet his increased circulation. All he had to do was fill in the date.

"Get this off as early as you can, will you?"

"Have it on the wire before you can shake a stick," Berea promised. "Mr. Lovejoy, there's somethin' else I want to talk about with you."

"Go ahead."

Berea leaned close. "It's about Carl Meehan. I know you're plumb against him. Now, if I had a young, pretty sister like yours, I'd sure want somebody besides Meehan hangin' around. I seen him head towards your house a time or two, while you was away. Maybe it ain't none of my business, but—"

Ben jumped up so suddenly that Berea almost toppled on his peg leg.

"For once in your life you're right. It is none of your business," he shouted. "Get out of here, and if you ever mention my sister again, I'll whip you like a dog."

Berea hobbled toward the door, clutching the telegram. "You heard him!" he screeched to Frank. "Try to do him a favor and he threatens me."

He vanished. How frightened was he? Ben could not tell. He sat there grinding his teeth in rage.

Gossip! Sunup lived on it.

"This is what Betty let us in for," he told himself. "This is the part she doesn't understand—and never will understand!"

IT was nearly three o'clock in the morning before he could leave the office, but the *Signal* was out. Two thousand copies had gone to Windmill Collander on the night train, as per contract. Frank and his friends had laid the local copies on front porches by midnight. Others had gone, in batches, to surrounding communities: Frohler, Liverpool, South Mesa, Pigeon Wells, Otexo, and the Quaker settlement at Pighead Rock.

Getting out an oversize paper was a twelve-hour ordeal which left Ben numb at the end. He hardly knew it when a shadow detached itself from the darker shadows in the hitch lot and fell into step beside him.

It was old Couple of Guns, Jim Agnew, drunk, but not as drunk as he could get. He had been warned never to carry his old, notched .45 in town, but tonight

it was belted defiantly on him.

"Howdy, Mr. Lovejoy," he said. "Lots of night work in your line, I see. I'll go a piece with you and make sure you get home. Sure is a hum-dinger, that piece you wrote about Roy gettin' killed."

"Liked it, did you?" Praise was always welcome when a man was this tired.

"Well, I never took to Roy none. Everybody to their own taste, as the old lady said when she kissed the cow. Where's your gun?"

"In my desk drawer."

"It's a good gun but it won't do you any good there. You want to tote it where—*keep back, feller!*"

This last was shouted at two men who suddenly came out of the alley. Before Jim could get his hands on the old .45 they had him pinned against the wall. Ben dimly made out a very short man, a very tall one.

Instinctively he struck out, feeling his fist sink into the tall man's abdomen. The man grunted and doubled up. Ben, who had not fought since he was a boy, heard old Jim blubber, and went hot. His right fist swung in a short arc. Pain jolted his whole arm as he connected with the tall man's temple. The man went down on his knees and threshed there.

The short man swore, drove his fist into Jim's stomach, and leaped at Ben as Jim buckled. Ben sidestepped and kept chopping, but the short man drove in, swearing under his breath, and took Ben's fists on his shoulders and head. Ben thought he felt bones break inside him as the short man leaped and bore him to the sidewalk.

Darkness ebbed over him, and then strangely he was standing up, and he was not hurt at all. He could hear the short man saying, "You all right, Baldy? Durned if he can't fight a little! Now Jim, I got your gun and I'll brain you if you make a move. Just stand still and you won't be hurt."

"He hits like a mule kickin'," the tall man complained, holding his swollen temple.

"I'll get you for this," old Jim was blubbering, from where he sat in the dust. "I know you, Baldy Wolf and Dude Smith, and I'll get you! You can't do this to old Jim Agnew!"

"Shut up," said the short man, called Dude. "Watch him, Baldy, so he don't take any notions, while I have a heart-to-heart talk with our friend."

His breath smelled of whisky as he shoved his face into Ben's. Ben felt the hard prod of a gun-muzzle in his middle as Dude backed him up against the wall.

"You don't know us, do you, Lovejoy?" Dude grated. "You're pretty smart, comin' in here and takin' sides against people you don't even know. You and old Clyde Gilmer sure got thick in a hurry, didn't you?"

"I'll get you!" Agnew sobbed.

"Shut up, Jim," Baldy said. "Nobody's sore at you."

DESPITE these interruptions, Dude had kept his angry gaze fixed on Ben.

"You ain't mixed with the common herd, have you?" Dude went on alcoholically, prodding Ben's stomach again with the gun. "You line up at the bar with Clyde but you keep space between you and the unwashed punchers. Listen!

"Yesterday, me and Baldy had jobs. Not much of jobs, because you don't make no extrys workin' for Clyde Gilmer's Circle G. Today we haven't even got that, thanks to you."

"Thanks to me?" Ben said, in amazement.

"Yes, thanks to you! One of the best friends I ever had was Carl Meehan. He pulled me out of quicksand once, he loaned me money and learned me to shoot, and no shorthorn newspaperman can call him a murderer while I'm around. I'll tell you the same as I told Clyde Gilmer—you're a pair of thieves and Carl ought to have taken a blacksnake whip to you. And as far as I'm concerned, this is all I got to say to you right now—"

Ben had heard swearing before, but nothing like the tirade which flowed from Dude Smith. Ben wondered, did

they stick us up just to listen to this? Dude called Gilmer every name he could think of. He cursed Gilmer back to his descent from Adam and went ahead to curse Gilmer descendants yet unborn.

"Hey, Dude, here comes old slew-foot Hamp," the tall man whispered warningly.

Sheriff Hamp Smith's slow, measured tread was echoing up the dark street. The short man's gun came up. Ben dodged, taking most of the blow on his shoulder, but his head rang and he toppled to his knees.

Dimly, he heard Dude whisper, "I'll lay this hogleg of yours down on the sidewalk up here a piece, Jim." Then his hand shook Ben roughly, and Ben heard him snarl, "This is just a friendly warnin', a taste of what you'll get if you monkey with Carl Meehan's friends."

Darkness came, and when Ben next knew anything, Sheriff Smith and Jim Agnew were supporting him between them, helping him along toward the house. He pushed them away, felt of his scalp. There was a big lump, a small cut.

"I'm all right," he said, thickly.

"Shucks!" the sheriff comforted him. "You ain't hurt. Those scapers were too drunk to hit hard. Two-three days you won't know where you were hit."

"So you know them. You don't seem to be in any hurry to run them down."

"Them? Oh, they'll sober up in the mornin'," the sheriff said. "They got a mite too much tonight, is all. Shot off their mouths to Senator Gilmer and he hauled off and fired 'em. Well, I guess you can make it home. Glad you're not hurt."

Ben's head was throbbing blindingly.

"You're not going to do anything to those two fellows?"

"Why, no, I reckon not," the sheriff said. "You ain't hurt. You see, they're mighty partial to Carl Meehan and they took offense at what you said in your newspaper. It's kind of personal, between you and them. A sheriff can't interfere in a personal fight, Mr. Lovejoy, now can he? Go on, Jim—take Mr. Lovejoy home."

"I see," Ben said. "I begin to see!"

He headed toward his house. Old Jim followed him, swearing and sputtering. Ben cut it short by handing the old gunman fifty cents. Jim took it gratefully and hobbled away to finish getting drunk.

Ben let himself into the house with a pounding head. Betty had left a lamp burning on the living room table. He took it to the kitchen and looked at himself in the mirror there. A huge, black lump showed where Carl Meehan's friend's gun had descended. There were dark circles of weariness under his eyes. He was dirty, from the struggle in the dust, and he needed a shave.

So this was running a newspaper in Texas!

BETTY came into the kitchen as he stared at his image in the glass. Her eyes were fogged with sleep, and she looked oddly young and childlike.

"What are you getting up at this hour for?" she asked.

"I am not getting up," he said, "I'm trying to get to bed, but I became interested in what a Texas editor looks like at four in the morning."

"You've been all night putting out the paper?" Then she noticed the lump on his head. "Ben! What happened?"

"I ran into some of your future husband's friends," he said. "They objected to the policy of my paper. They were—rather firm."

"What paper?"

She snatched his copy of the *Signal* from his pocket, spread out the rumpled page, and read it, more worried over what he had written than about the lump on his head. Her mouth began trembling and she covered it with her hand.

"Oh, Ben!"

He met her eyes.

"I suppose," he said, "you'll be on his side?"

Without a word, she laid the paper down and returned to her room. He picked up the lamp and stared at himself in the mirror. He had always had a sense of humor. It returned now, as he saw the mess he was.

"Women and Texas—two things I'll never understand!" he sighed. "At least, not at this hour of the night."

VI

NEXT morning Ben slept until eleven o'clock. When he got up, Betty was not in the house. Lucy, the Mexican woman who worked for them, understood very little English. Ben was not sure whether she knew what he was saying or not. He suspected she was pretending.

But he could not learn from her where Betty was.

He went down to the office with a pounding headache. Old Berea Hyde stumped in and laid a brown-paper envelope on the desk.

"Where did this come from?" Ben asked, noticing the SPECIAL HANDLING sign and the railroad's return on the envelope.

"From the Flyer," Berea snarled. "I just deliver railroad property and messages. I don't answer questions, Mr. Lovejoy."

He went out, and Ben opened the envelope. It was a note from Windmill Collander:

Dear Mr. Lovejoy:—Have reports on my investigation of Meehan. He is one quarter Cherokee. His grandfather was a squaw man. Take the attitude in your paper, do we want a "breed representing us in the Senate?" The squaw, his grandmother, is still living. He can't deny it. Hit this hard!

Collander

Ben twisted the paper in his hands, wishing it was Collander's throat. Yet somehow he seemed to see the old squaw leering over his shoulder at Betty, claiming her for the tribe. . . .

Frank's bare feet pattered at the back door and he burst in with his eyes big and round.

"Senor Ben, a big bunch are putting their horses on the lot. That Meehan, he's one of them. I think they come see you."

Ben jerked open the desk drawer, laid the .44 on top of his desk.

"Thanks, Frank. Better go on outside."

"Shall I call the sheriff?"

"Not necessary. Just make yourself scarce."

"They are thirteen, Senor Ben," Frank worried.

He went away unwillingly. Ben listened to the thump of hoofs, the rumble of voices, on the hitch-lot next door. In a moment they came trooping down the sidewalk to stop at his door. He counted thirteen of them.

Meehan was in the lead. Beside him walked the big Missourian who worked for the Etcetera, Clip Foshay. Another man, a small, gnarled, hot-tempered little rancher called "Ogallala" Schofield, Ben knew by name. The others were strangers.

Meehan opened the door and came in, and the others trooped in after him, filling the room silently. Ben stood up. None of them wore guns, he opened the drawer and replaced the .44.

"Howdy, Ben," Meehan said quietly.

He showed the Cherokee strongly now. Like most cowboys his legs were not straight, but unlike them he had an easy, springy stride, and the lazy grace of a cat. His dark, hatchet face was solemn and long, and his eyes were narrowly watchful.

"Hello, Mr. Meehan," Ben said. "Anything I can do for you?"

Meehan licked his lips. Behind him, Ogallala Schofield's eyes burned and his breath came unevenly. Clip Foshay bit off a big bite of "sweet black," or plug tobacco, and began chewing. He seemed to have no nerves, no conscience-worries over Roy Nennet's death.

"Ben, this is a friendly visit," Meehan said. "These people are my friends. Some of 'em just work for cow outfits and some own brands of their own. Some do both. Clip come along because he was with my bunch in town yesterday. We want to talk over that piece you had in the paper, and show you why we're against Clyde and the Gilmer Bill. We'll show you we ain't murderers, like you said. Clip, here, is a good boy. You ain't heard his side. Will you listen?"

"Yes, sure I'll listen," Ben said, thinking, "He talks like an ignoramus but a

smart one. Windmill's right. He's a strong candidate and people will follow him." But he also knew Windmill was wrong about another thing. Attack Meehan as a "breed," as the grandson of a Cherokee squaw? One look at those twelve grim men ranged behind him told Ben that such tactics would only draw his friends tighter to him.

BEN made an attempt to ease the tension. He said, "Let's sit down, shall we?"

"Thanks, we'll stand," Ogallala Schofield said. "Say your piece, Carl—but I'm a-thinkin' it's a waste of good breath."

"Easy does it, Ogallala," Meehan said. His dark face lighted in a grin, and Schofield subsided.

"Ben, murder's a devil of a word. The boys say you seen it yourself, and they can't understand you takin' this attitude. They want me to ask you just one question."

"Go ahead. I'll stand questioning. A newspaper—*my* newspaper, anyway—has to stand behind its words."

"Thought you'd feel that way," Meehan said soberly. "Then, suppose you were in Shorty's shoes yesterday. Suppose you seen Roy lean out of that window with that deer-gun cocked and loaded. Suppose you seen him shoot Clip's hoss—and you're standin' there with that dinky little twenty-two in your hand. What would you do? That's what the boys wanted me to ask you."

"Dead or alive, I hold no brief for Roy Nennet," Ben said. "However, I saw him shoot the horse, despite the fact that all of your men were armed. Mr. Meehan, you don't kill a man for killing a horse!"

"How's that?" Meehan cried.

His face showed blank bewilderment. Then slowly his look changed.

"I get it! It dawns on me! Now, Ben, don't you know why Roy shot that horse? His brother was tied to it and if he didn't, that wild paint would have dragged Seth to death. It was Clip he aimed to kill! But if he shot Clip first, the paint was out of control. Don't you see? Roy wasn't scared of Shorty and that dinky little twenty-two rifle. It was Clip and his forty-five he wanted to get—only he had to kill that paint first. Can't you understand that? Won't you see he was gettin' the horse out of the way so he could draw down on Clip?"

And suddenly Ben did see. Suddenly he remembered that Clip had yelled at Roy to "put up that gun," without going for his own gun. Clip had clung to the wounded horse to keep it from dragging Seth. Suddenly he remembered that Clip had made no attempt to go for his own gun, even with that .30-30 slamming its thick slugs into the paint.

He felt a little sick, remembering all this, realizing how far Clip had gone to avoid mankilling, but he said stubbornly: "I would have shot Roy Nennet, just as Shorty did, only I wouldn't have found myself in that predicament in the first place. Your men came to town looking for trouble. It was an election trick, but it went too far, and it cost a life needlessly. You can't bait a man into drawing a gun and then claim self-defense when you kill him. I give Clip credit for courage, for trying to avoid killing—but the time to avoid it was before he came to town."

Meehan's face lengthened, darkened as Ben talked.

"That," he said, "brings us back to the election question. You wasn't here the other election—not the last one, but the one before that, the first time Clyde Gilmer had to run on his record. Ben, he *stole* that election. A nice old feller name of Bob Updike filed against him. on an anti-railroad platform. They run poor old Bob out of the country. Circle G boys hazed him to bankruptcy—he died up in Texarkana last year. They cut his fences and filled in his waterholes—every dirty, filthy trick you ain't supposed to do in a cow-country.

"And you talk about trouble-makers in town! Wasn't an evenin' there wasn't a big Circle G gang in Sunup or Frohler. Gilmer had sixty or seventy men workin' for him that year. Why? To bullyrag folks. Why ain't he tried it this year? Because we jumped the gun on

him! We declared war first! He knows it'll be a shootin' war if he hires men for that purpose another time. Why Ben, we're not tryin' to steal the election! We just want to make sure it ain't stolen from us."

"Ah, the devil with him!" Schofield snarled. "He eats a meal or two at Gilmer's house, thinks he's cut from the top round because a state senator neighbors with him, and dirty ordinary workin' folks can't get near him after that. We ain't gettin' anywhere with this feller, Carl. Let's go home."

"Easy, Ogallala," Meehan said, his grin returning.

WATCHING Meehan, Ben marveled at his ability to handle other men. He knew exactly when to be serious—when to grin and when to be cold.

"I guess this ain't the right time for a talk," Meehan went on. "We come in here like a delegation against one man. You boys go on out."

"You do your business your way," Schofield cut in stridently, "and I'll do mine my way. I got a wife and three kids. I got the tar stung out of me by Windmill Collander on that Box B property. Top of that they sue to drive me off my wife's place, that the dad-burned State of Texas give her grandpa for soldierin' in the Mexican war, and now is tryin' to crawfish out of like a tinhorn."

"I promised Mattie I wouldn't let you get in any fights, Ogallala," Meehan said with a chuckle. "Come on. You boys take Ogallala outside. Ben and I can talk this over."

"All right," Ogallala panted. "All right, I'll go. A scripper don't want to carry the smell of this place home!"

He forced his way through the crowd, and they followed him, all but Meehan and Clip Foshay. Ben heard them grumbling on the sidewalk outside.

Meehan leaned on the top of the roll-top desk. "There's another matter, a personal one," he said. "I asked Clip to be my witness. I understand you think I ought to ask permission to see your sister."

"You're a little late with that, don't you think?"

"No, I don't." This was costing Meehan an effort. He was having trouble holding his temper while he got it said. "I never heard of a man havin' to ask before. This is the kind of a country where a decent man is welcome without askin' and the other kind don't dare. Nobody ever called me to account before."

Clip Foshay grinned. Meehan's angry color deepened. He would be joshed about this for a long time.

"I'm not calling you to account. If you want to call on my sister, I can't stop you," Ben said.

"But you won't give permission."

"I will not."

"Why not?"

Ben felt his own anger growing to match Meehan's.

"I don't need to give reasons, Mr. Meehan, but I will. First, there's talk about you that needs clearing up. I don't believe it but a few people do, and my sister deserves a clean name. Second, she traces her descent back to the first settlers in America and has a deep family feeling. I understand you are part Indian. Believe me, I know my sister! She's a snob, and when she gets over the thrill she'll be unhappy. That's all. I like you personally. I trust you and respect you. But as a political or family connection—no."

"I'll be a dirty son of a Gila monster!" Clip Foshay murmured, as though his astonishment was too great for words.

Meehan's jaw fell and the color gradually left his face.

"You think Betty would come to think her family is too good for me?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Because I'm part Indian?"

"Yes."

Meehan's hands clenched on top of the desk. His mouth twisted. His eyes glittered.

"I ought to take a whip to you," he panted, "but for Betty's sake, I won't. I'll overlook it—this time. Come on, Clip."

Clip plodded after him to the door.

Meehan flung it open and looked back.

And suddenly the black temper was gone from his face—suddenly his dark, infectious grin was back. Ben had a feeling that only a little would be required to make him laugh out loud.

"I asked you," he said, "and you turned me down, fair and square. Now I'm tellin' you—fair and square—that I'm a-goin' to see her anyway. So long, Ben. The trouble is, we were brought up different—only don't forget, you're in *my* part of the country now."

He went out. Clip Foshay hesitated briefly in the doorway. The big Missourian hitched at his pants. His mouth worked.

Deliberately, he spat a big puddle of brown tobacco juice on the floor beside the desk.

Then he closed the door.

VII

PLAINLY, frankly, the Sunup *Signal* had said its piece. It was on its own now, for better or worse. When Ben walked down the street, fewer men spoke to him, but he sensed respect.

In a sense, he had replaced Senator Gilmer as leader of a faction. Men came to him instead of Gilmer to say what was on their minds.

"Generally you're right, Mr. Lovejoy," most of them said. "I never looked at it that way before, but like my old lady says, we do need more of a sheriff than we got. Too many shootings."

Or they said, "I never exactly favored Clyde Gilmer—voted for him because he was better than nobody—but I reckon old Clyde has done a lot for this country after all."

Or, "The old days are gone forever. You called a spade a spade, Mr. Lovejoy. Me and the old lady are for you."

These were the symbols of the power of the press. Even the unfriendly comment pleased him. A paper that made only friends was no power at all. It had to make enemies, too.

Unfriendly comment came in various ways. Ben stopped in at the Wigfall House bar and a tall German set down his glass and said, "I go home now. It schmells up in here." Or a drunken cowboy lurched up to Ben on the street to say, "I want to set you right. You got Carl Meehan wrong. He's a good feller." And when Ben shook off his arm and went on, the cowboy yelled, "Go plumb to blazes, then. You ain't seen the day you could match licks with Carl Meehan!"

His mail doubled. There were many notes like this:

NOTICE: Quit sending your dirty paper to our house. You are just a sell-out to the dirty railroad land-grabbers. What we need is a paper with guts to come out for the common man.

Ben sighed when he read these letters. To hate the railroad was one thing. To want to destroy it was another. But it meant they were paying attention to the *Signal!*

Sunday came, and with it time for another editorial. He went down to the office early. Home was too cold and cheerless since his "Lord Help Texas" edition. Betty went around with a long face and sad eyes, and tried to avoid talking with him.

There were three churches in Sunup. Betty had left early, for some reason, before Ben went to the office. He sat there a while, trying to think of how to hit 'em hard, watching Sunup's more respectable people on their way to church.

A quiet little man with a round paunch opened the door and looked in.

"Hello, Mr. Lovejoy. I see you're one of those who don't know the Lord's day was made for rest, either. Will I interrupt you?"

"Not a bit, Mr. Frazer," Ben said. "Come in. Maybe you can help me out on something."

"Glad to."

Homer Frazer came in and sat down beside Ben's desk. He took off his gray derby, adjusted his glasses, and selected a long cigar from a fine leather case.

"Have one? No? Don't mind if I smoke, I hope."

Homer Frazer was Executive Vice-President of the Sunup National Bank.

He had come here from Fort Worth four years ago, as the railroad was being finished. His critics called him Senator Gilmer's errand boy. His friends said, "Homer's a good banker, but a cold fish, hard to get acquainted with."

Frazer leaned back and puffed his cigar. "Had my Sunday walk. Wouldn't ride a horse for a deed to Texas. You said you wanted help. Mind if I say a few plain things first?"

"Go right ahead."

"I will. I came from New York originally. Had a devil of a time getting used to the way Texans think. Ever hear of the Texas Code."

"A little," Ben laughed. "Like to do an editorial on it if I can ever pin it down long enough to understand it."

FRAZER frowned. Then he slowly shook his head.

"No laughing matter, Mr. Lovejoy. It's half Confederate Cavalier, half frontier bluff, half State's rights politics, half blowhard. Yes, a thing like the Texas Code can have more than two halfs! Perhaps it is preposterous, but did you ever think about the fact that the more absurd a people's belief, the more violently they believe in it?

"I mean," he said earnestly, "that you've got to understand there is such a thing as the Texas Code, and you have raised some very serious questions under it with your editorial. One of these days somebody is going to realize that you have created some unfinished business. He's going to 'oil up his six-gun and go varmint-huntin'.' As a fellow Easterner, I would regret seeing you killed—right away, at least."

His imitation of the Texas drawl was bitter, rather than funny. It showed Ben that Homer Frazer had a secret—a deep, burning hatred of Texas and everything in it.

Ben shrugged. "I had a newspaper plant burned around my ears down in South Carolina. I had rocks through my windows, as fast as I could put new glass in them, in Rhode Island. In Ohio they got up a committee to ride me out of town on a rail. In all three cases, people lived to say they were sorry, that I had been right all along. The way to get a newspaper through such danger is to keep hitting—again and again, as hard as you can."

"Oh?" Frazer smiled. "Well, I guess nobody lives forever. I'm afraid you'll find Texas is different. Keep on hitting Meehan again and again and again, and under the Texas Code, he's got to come after you. If he can't, because of your sister, some of his friends will. On the other hand, you may smoke out a different set of facts. You may only serve to convince people that Roy Nennet had it coming, and that you're really just raising a smoke screen. Texas people don't like smoke screens."

"Come out and say what you mean, Frazer."

"Me?" Frazer smiled again. "I'm a banker—I never say what I mean. A word to the wise—you're very close to upsetting something important. I understand you pack a gun. One more word of advice—*don't*. If you go armed, your killer can always say, as it was said about Roy Nennet, that you drew first. Go unarmed! Then you're a shorthorn, an Easterner, and it wouldn't be quite fair to kill you. They may tar and feather you, but you'll probably live."

"But Senator Gilmer gave me the gun."

"Senator Gilmer," Frazer snapped, "invented the Texas Code, for all I know. Senator Gilmer is a blind old fool, and if you listen to him your sister will live to bury you here—soon. Take my word for it, Mr. Lovejoy, you're asking for trouble. Well, I won't bother you any longer. Good day."

He put his hat back on and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute," Ben said. "Let's forget my editorial a while. Maybe you're the man to advise me on the railroad case, the Gilmer Bill, the scrip lawsuits." Frazer came back and leaned against the desk.

"Let me warn you—the less you know about that, the better. You're an honest man."

Ben shrugged. Frazer sighed. "All

right, Mr. Lovejoy, I'll tell you all I know. There are no Federal lands in Texas. This was an independent republic, and in ceding her title to New Mexico to the United States, she retained all her public domain when she became a state.

"Texas fought two wars in twelve years. She won the first, against Mexico, with American help. She lost the second—the Civil War. To the veterans of these two wars the State of Texas issued scrip, a certificate good for certain quantities of the public domain."

THE bank president paused for a moment before continuing:

"Things were handled pretty carelessly, both in the field and in the land office. A lot of people might file on the same property, and the State sometimes validated two or three titles to it. Sometimes surveys were faulty. The courts have had the devil's own time straightening out some of those old errors.

"Most of the people around here started as scrippers. They came here and exchanged their scrip for land. It was chuckful of maverick cattle and broomtail horses, and a poor man had a chance if his scrip was good and his rope was long. That's how most of the cattlemen around here got in business.

"Then eleven years ago, the State Legislature passed a bill granting the Pueblo, Dallas and Rio Valley Railway a right-of-way through the public domain. They got, in fact, every other section of *unoccupied* land for their railroad. Where they had to drive rails through somebody's ranch, they were supposed to go to court and condemn, and pay a fair price for the property.

"The catch, though, is in the definition of 'unoccupied' land. The railroad simply sent their lawyers to Austin to trace the local scrip filings, and claimed to find errors in dozens of cases, errors which canceled the title held by the scrippers and caused the land to revert to the public domain! In other words, many and many a ranch was claimed by the railroad under its right-of-way grant.

"In each of these cases the railroad filed what they called a 'friendly' lawsuit, seeking to obtain title to the contested property. The cases have dragged on and on, some judges deciding one way, some another.

"The Gilmer Bill is described in its title as 'An act to quiet title in, to and for certain parcels, formerly in the public domain, now asserted by divers parties under Section so-and-so.' In effect, it creates a State Title Commission, with judicial powers, which first sets a value on the contested land and then decides who owns it.

"The catch is that the bill finally admits that doubt does exist in these land titles. That's what the scrippers object to in the Gilmer Bill. They say there is no doubt—the land is theirs and always has been."

"I begin to understand," Ben said. "The railroad will get the land. The scrippers will get a few dollars and the State's blessing."

"I doubt it," Frazer smiled. "Do you have any idea how much value is placed on the land along the right-of-way claimed by both the scrippers and the P. D. & R. V.?"

"No."

"How would fifteen million dollars strike you?"

Ben whistled. "Hard! I begin to understand."

"I thought you would. See? Mr. Old Soldier is mad as a wet hen, with the Gilmer Bill putting this cloud on his title to his brush-patch ranch. The Commission knocks him cold by setting a value on his five-hundred-dollar ranch of—oh, four, ten, fifteen thousand dollars—just pick any figure. Think how angry Mr. Old Soldier is going to be at the prospect of losing this property.

"But—he doesn't lose it! The Commission decides in *his* favor. He gets to keep the land—and the railroad gets the cash, just about the time Mr. Old Soldier begins to take his second think about the matter. See, Mr. Lovejoy? The railroad raises a new, fifeen-million-dollar kitty, at State expense. It also keeps a settler on the line, someone to raise beef and

ship over the P. D. & R. V., somebody to provide the road with an income and a reason for existence in this God forsaken fragment of hell on earth."

Silence, while Frazer chewed his cigar.

"What happens if the bill is defeated?" Ben asked.

FRAZER shrugged. "Well, Clyde tried to get it through at the last session. Put it through the Senate, lost it in the House. The P. D. & R. V. was floating a new bond issue. When the Gilman Bill passed the Senate, those bonds were bid up from ninety-four cents on the dollar to a dollar-seven. When the House turned it down, those bonds started sliding. You can buy a good hundred-dollar P. D. & R. V. bond now for about eighty-five dollars."

Again Ben whistled. "Then everything depends on Gilmer's reelection?"

"Just about. He can get the bill through this time, Windmill Collander says. And Windmill never makes mistakes in these matters."

"The pea," Ben said, "is always under one shell or the other. Now, let me tell you the other side of the story, Mr. Frazer. Granted that the Gilmer Bill can be termed a fifteen-million-dollar treasury raid. After all, the State did give the land to two different people. If I sell the same thing twice, I've got to pony up, haven't I?"

"You make a good case," Frazer smiled. "Go on."

"The State got itself into this mess. I'm a Sunup business man. If the Gilmer Bill fails, the railroad fails, and we fail with it. We'll die on the vine without a railroad. If the railroad survives the fifteen million dollars will actually become an investment in Frohler and the other counties along the line."

"Still making a good case. A very good case!"

Ben stood up. "The time to crusade against horse-stealing is before the horse is stolen, Mr. Frazer. We live or die with the railroad. Fifteen million is cheap enough, to save the whole Panhandle."

"That's right!"

"Then why," Ben shouted, "didn't Clyde Gilmer tell me all of this, instead of making stump speeches about honor and justice and his family name?"

"That," Frazer said, "you'll have to ask the senator. Oh, Clyde's all right, but he's a big windbag, a false front—like the Wigfall House over there. By the way, know how the hotel got its name?"

"No."

"Wigfall was a Texas 'hero' who helped take the state into the Confederacy, almost over the dead body of one of the grandest men in history, old Sam Houston. As Senator Wigfall, he was a slobbering buffoon, the biggest blatherskite in Washington. As General Wigfall, he lost more battles and got more Southern boys killed than any officer in the Confederate army. In every act, however, he remained true to the Texas Code."

He saluted Ben with a gay smile and went out, calling from the door: "Throw away that fool gun. Let everyone know you've given it back to Clyde. What business have you got, trying to live up to the Texas Code? You're a polled critter like myself."

As Frazer went out the front door, Frank came in the back one.

"Frank, what's a polled critter?" Ben asked.

He had to repeat it before Frank understood.

"Oh, *si!* It means no horns, *Senor* Ben. a white-faced bool sheeped in, *senor.*"

"A whiteface bull, shipped in. I get it—he means I'm not a good Texas longhorn." Ben chuckled.

He went to the type case and hovered over it, words beginning to sift together in his mind.

"Frazer gave me the dope. Make it big and black. Hit it hard. Show them how we live or die as the railroad lives or dies. Got to save the railroad to save ourselves. Yes, that's the line to take —the solid truth, whether Gilmer or Meehan or anyone else likes it. Keep hammering away."

"*Senor!* Come see them all dressed op," Frank called softly, from the front window.

Ben went to the door and looked out.

THE woman rode a little in front of the two men. She had already passed by the time Ben got to the door, but she turned and he got a fleeting glimpse of a small, tawny face. She was small, at least half a head shorter than Betty, and plumper, but still narrow of waist, small-boned, with little hands and small, dainty wrists, white against round, sunbrowned arms. She was a woman who had ridden bare-armed, guarding her hands and wrists with leather work gauntlets.

"So that's Mrs. Laura Bratton!" Ben whispered. "He's a cool one, that Meehan."

Meehan rode a little behind the woman, and to her right. He had on a green silk shirt, double-breasted, with a row of white nacre buttons, big as half-dollars, down each side. He wore a tall, white sombrero, new tan boots, a flaming orange scarf and white gloves. The rest of him was encased in rumpled blue serge.

Clip Foshay, on Mrs. Bratton's left, was equally adorned. He had also gone so far as to leave off chewing for this Sunday.

He puffed at a small, crooked Mexican cheroot.

All three rode fine horses, holding them down to a dancing walk. Ben had to admire the elfin grace of the woman in the saddle. Her flowing divided skirt seemed a hindrance, but under it her tight, small, perfect little body seemed proudly at home on the nervous horse. He knew she had seen him. Her haughty, straight little back seemed to say to Ben:

"Do you disapprove of this? Then take it up with Mr. Meehan and get whipped for your pains!"

"Wonder where they've been," Ben said.

Frank shrugged.

They passed from Ben's sight. When

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and ... Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."
Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp
HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff... keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair ... and it's economical, too!
Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®
Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.
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he went back to his type case, the words would not come. He had heard so much about Laura Bratton. . . . He tried to compose in type, but the woman's picture kept coming between him and the type.

Angrily, he went back to his desk and forced himself to write:

THE RAILROAD—MASTER OR SERVANT, ENEMY OR FRIEND?

Let's get at the truth.

Let's quit crying over spilt milk.

Let's look at the future, instead of the past.

We're all scrippers, when you come right down to it. None of us had much money when we came here. Most of us have made a little. There is always a chanee we'll make more—maybe a lot more. This is a good cattle country and this paper will string along with beef.

However, all the money has been made in the last few years. Nobody saw much cash until it was possible to ship beef out of here by rail.

As long as we can go on shipping by rail, we'll handle a little cash. When rail service stops, and we have to go back to trail-herding, we go broke.

Unfortunately, there is a grave chance that—

Senator Gilman yelled Ben's name from the door. Ben whirled, wondering at the expression on the man's face. Gilmer came in, closed the door, motioned for Frank to leave. The Mexican boy darted out, and Ben dropped his pencil and stood up, alarmed by Gilmer's look.

"Ben, how long since you been home?"

"Not since early this morning, Clyde."

"Then you ain't heard the news?"

Ben felt sick and weak; why did he think of Betty?

"What news?"

"By the great horn spoon, for a newspaper man you sure don't keep up with the tidings," Gilmer said. "Your sister and Carl Meehan got married about half an hour ago in the Baptist Church."

Anger and relief struggled for control of Ben. "They what?"

"They got married. Laura Bratton and Clip Foshay stood up with 'em. I got it from my man Pedro—you know how Mexicans hear a thing before it happens—and I stopped by the church to make sure, on my way here." His bushy brows came together. "Look, Ben, you wouldn't double-cross me now, would you?"

"You fool!" Ben snarled.

GILMER ran a shaking hand over his forehead, then said, "Because you try to double-cross me—you take railroad money and then come out for Meehan, now he's a relation—" Then the senator's big hand clasped Ben's shoulder and shook it, and he said gently, "You'll please excuse that, Ben. I got the election on my mind and for a minute it seemed hard to believe a clannish people like you-all would split, that you'd go against your own brother-in-law."

"Don't call him that, Clyde," Ben said, grating his teeth. "I guess I'd better go home now. I didn't see Betty with them. I assume that's where she is."

"Yes. He kissed her on the church steps, and then she went her way and he went his own. I'll go with you."

Ben dreaded the meeting and he had never wanted Senator Gilmer less than he did now. But he was in Texas, and here people "bore each other up" at weddings, funerals, indictments, and all the other human crises. Gilmer was, after all, his best friend.

They plodded up the street in silence, and by the silence Ben knew that the story was all over town by now. Anger rose in him as he neared the house and saw the tracks of four shod horses at his own hitch-post. There his enemies' horses had stood while they put a barrier between him and his own sister. There they had waited, before giving him an uncouth breed for a brother-in-law.

"Betty!" he shouted, into an empty house.

The senator followed him to the back porch. Betty came out of the little adobe stable, where she had just put up her horse. By the very way she walked, he could tell how frightened she was, now that it was over with. He went down the steps and waited for her. The senator remained in the kitchen, looking through the screen door.

She came up to him slowly, her trem-

bling hands locked at her throat.

"I understand you have something to tell me, Betty."

She made a timid, wordless gesture toward Gilmer.

"Is it necessary now?" she whispered. "Can't we wait?"

"Until we are alone, you mean?" he said, stepping aside. Gilmer opened the screen for her and Ben said, "Please go in, Mrs. Meehan. Make yourself right at home. Of course it's not a teepee but try to feel comfortable. Don't mind Senator Gilmer. Everyone's already laughing their heads off."

Up came Betty's head. Color flared in her cheeks. Her fingers took her skirts. She mounted the steps proudly and gave Gilmer a curt nod as she went through the door.

"Good morning, Senator. How very thoughtful of you to call at this hour, when you're so busy. You must be busy, Senator—you're always such a busybody!"

VIII

CRIMSON with anger, Betty did not sit down. Senator Gilmer took out a huge claspknife and opened and closed the blade noisily.

"I was the last to hear," Ben said, shutting the door. "I want to know why you did it this way."

"Is it necessary to discuss family affairs before strangers?"

"Senator Gilmer is hardly a stranger. Why, Betty?"

"It should be obvious," she said, coldly, "after that editorial of yours, Ben. If a woman loves a man she will stand by him when he needs her most. It was my way of quieting the idle, cruel, malicious gossip that has been circulated by cowardly people, to damage Carl."

"You mean about him and Laura Bratton," Gilmer said. His voice was harsh. "You think you can stop that talk this way?"

"I know I can!"

"You're a little fool!" he said, contemptuously. "If you were my sister I'd take a cowhide and teach you to keep your hands off man's business. You're too forward, miss, and you always been against me. That breed will soon make a squaw of you!"

She came around the table and threw herself at him, spitting like a wildcat. Gilmer backed away, holding the knife over his head to keep her from cutting herself. Ben tried to catch her arms from behind. Unexpectedly she screamed and slapped him.

"Ben! Ben, if you don't whip him, I will!"

He caught her wrist, and she stopped fighting, to back up against the wall and stand there, chest heaving, hair disarranged, eyes snapping. She looked wild. She looked like anything but his old, cool, steady sister. And she looked more beautiful than he had ever thought plain little Betty could be.

"That's enough, Ben. Let me go. Don't ever bring an evil old man into my house to read me a lecture."

"Your house?"

"Yes, my house! I'm not a charity case, Ben. When a woman makes a house into a home, it's hers. I've obeyed you long enough. Don't make me talk to you any more, or I'll say something to be sorry for."

She turned and stared at Gilmer. "Get this! That gossip will stop now if Carl has to kill you. Laura kept him from it this long, but no man on earth can stop him now. Because, you old fool, the talk will be about his *wife* now! Laura's his boss but I'm his wife—his wife, do you understand that?"

Senator Gilmer grunted.

"You'd better listen!" she cried ringingly. "Why, you cowardly, filthy old man—you're the one who started this talk! And you'd better listen, because I can't hold Carl back the way Laura did and I won't try. I hope he does kill you!"

"Betty," Ben said, shaking her. "You don't know what you're saying!"

"Don't I? Don't I? Do you think it's the election that makes him hate Carl? Look at him! Look at his horrid, jealous face! He's been crazy about Laura Brat-

ton ever since she came to Sunup, and she won't have anything to do with him. She laughed in his face, and he has been crazy ever since."

"Now by the eternal, shut her mouth or I will!" Gilmer roared.

He closed the knife with a click, dropped it in his pocket, and started across the room. Ben came between them but Betty snatched up a small stone vase full of flowers and flung it over his head. Gilmer ducked, but it spattered water and flowers over his shoulder as it crashed against the wall.

"He can't shut my mouth and neither can you, ever!" she screamed. "I've told the truth and you know it's the truth! You wanted her to be your girl before she met Joe Bratton, and when her husband was so *conveniently* murdered you went to see her again. And she spit in your face, didn't she? She wouldn't touch you and all your money with a ten-foot pole, because she's a decent, honorable woman and you're a cowardly, skulking dog that ought to be horsewhipped out of Texas!"

BEN got his right arm around her, his left hand across her mouth. She went limp, and when he saw the fight was out of her he lowered her into a chair. Gilmer stood there with his fists clenched, a big wet splotch on one shoulder, his hair rumpled, his face deathly white.

"You'd better leave, Clyde," Ben said. "This is pretty private and we're in the habit of keeping our affairs that way."

"I want to hear her apology first."

Betty sat up. "I'll see you blister first! Get out of my house!"

"You'd better go, Clyde," Ben warned him a second time.

Gilmer nodded and headed toward the front of the house. They heard the door close. Ben felt like laughing. The whole thing suddenly seemed uproariously funny.

"You accused him of murdering Joe Bratton, Betty," he said. "Joe was shot in the back, you know."

The starch was gone out of her. "Oh, no! I didn't really, Ben," she whimpered.

"But you did. I suppose that's Meehan's version of it. Don't bother to deny it. You never could lie to me, Betty. It was a rotten, mean, cowardly thing for Meehan to plant that in your inexperienced mind—to attack with gossip a man like Clyde Gilmer, and then cry because there is gossip about himself."

"Oh, Ben, Carl didn't—he didn't!"

He stared across the table at her as she began to cry brokenly.

"Why, Betty, I begin to understand you at last. I always thought you had a strong mind. Now I see it's just a faithful one. You were always faithful to me—my ideas—before. Now you've found someone more important, and all the rest of your life you'll think, believe, feel, the way Carl Meehan thinks, believes, feels."

"He has never lied to me," she said stubbornly.

"Very well. You're his wife. You can stay here as long as you wish, Sis. You can go to him whenever he can give you a home. But if you wish to meet him, from now on it must be somewhere else. I insist upon that much."

She stood up and swept past him with her head high. "Quite! Do you want me to tell Carl that, or do you really imagine he would ever enter your house again, except to take me away? I'm through talking about it, Ben."

She disappeared into her bedroom. He knew she would throw herself down on the bed and cry, and he felt sorry for her. . . . Then he heard her light a lamp, and he swore with amazement. The only time she ever lighted a lamp in the daylight was to heat a curling iron to curl her hair.

"Women!"

Women went on doing the things important to them, though the world ended. Men must do the same. He got up wearily and went down to the office, and tore up the editorial he had been writing about the railroad. A woman's elopement might change the fate of a railroad, a state; fifteen million dollars hung on it. He smiled and shook his head at the thought.

"Betty's cut more of a figure in Texas

politics than I have," he chuckled. "Good girl! I didn't think she had it in her."

He got down to work, setting type as he composed:

THE RIGHT TO HAPPINESS

The editor of this paper herewith announces the marriage of his sister, Miss Betty Lovejoy, to Mr. Carl Meehan, manager of the Etcetera ranch, South Mesa property owner, and candidate for State Senator.

The ceremony, performed by Rev. Dr. Lewis Mather, of the Sunup Baptist Church, took place last Sunday, with Mr. Clip Foshay and Mrs. Laura Bratton as witnesses.

The bride and groom will announce their future plans in some later edition of this paper.

In the meantime, it becomes necessary for your editor to restate his position on several issues, due to the fact that he has supported, and will continue to support, Mr. Meehan's opponent, Senator Clyde Gilmer, for reelection.

Your editor would have opposed this marriage, had he known it was coming, for several reasons, of private nature.

However, now that it has happened, he joins with the many friends of Mr. and Mrs. Meehan to wish them long married happiness, useful lives.

It will be unfortunate if this marriage is regarded anywhere as a reconciliation between political factions.

It is nothing of the kind.

Betty Lovejoy had an inalienable right to happiness, to the husband of her choice.

It is hoped that Carl Meehan has the same right.

However, their marriage solves only their personal problems.

We still require the Gilmer Bill. We still need Senator Clyde Gilmer in Austin.

This paper will continue to battle for what is best for Sunup and Frohler County, regardless of family alliances.

This issue cannot be settled on personalities, or by personal alliances.

Let's have Gilmer and the Gilmer Bill. For a change, let's have judges with courage to decide the land cases, which have been delayed far too long.

In the meantime, the *Signal* repeats its best wishes for the newly married couple.

Get out an extra. In all the history of Sunup, Texas, it had never seen an extra edition of the *Signal*.

Miraculously, Frank appeared. He always managed to turn up when there was work or excitement afoot. Ben whistled as he put his front page together. There was no other news. On the front page, with his "right to happiness" editorial, he put columns of Sunup Land and Water Company advertisements.

LUCY, the Mexican servant, came down to ask if he was coming home to supper. He shook his head and went on whistling, and the woman looked at the clanking press and went away muttering curses in Spanish.

The town came awake outside. The elopement had brought people into Sunup to hear all the details. None dared to come into the shop, but word got around that he was getting out a paper, and they waited for it. The Wigfall House bar did a roaring business. Every hitch-rail in town was full.

Sleep? When Ben Lovejoy came west his Vermont doctor said, "I've been in Texas. It's hot and dry and lonesome and nothing ever happens. Lie around in the sun, breathe deeply, sleep around the clock—for there's nothing to do there anyway." Ben grinned, remembering this.

Sleep? At two o'clock the Mexican boys stopped spinning the big press and Ben baled up the last of Windmill Collander's two thousand copies.

Sleep? He could sleep a year. He sprawled out in his chair, and Frank said, "Senor Ben, you better go home." He shook his head.

"Those papers have got to get down to the depot about daylight, Frank. See to it, will you? I'll nap here."

He was asleep before Frank was out of the room. . . .

It was Betty who awakened him, lighting the big lamp over his desk, although sunlight came through the rear window. He sat up groggily, remembering she was a married woman, Mrs. Carl Meehan, Texas gentlewoman. She picked a paper off the stack by the press and read it through. Her face was blank.

"Good morning, Ben," she said, when he stood up.

"Good morning, Betty."

Frank had brought a pack-burro to the back door to haul Windmill's bales of paper down to the depot. Yawning, Ben went to the back door to watch the loading operation—the hard-working, earnest boy, the sleepy, stubborn burro. Betty touched his shoulder.

"Please, Ben. Do you have to do this?"

"Do what?"

A drunken voice began singing at the other end of the alley, and two men appeared. They were Dude Smith and Baldy Wolf. They came reeling toward the back of the print shop with their arms around each other, singing a ribald song about a yaller gal with yaller hair, yaller eyes and yaller relations. They wore empty holsters. Either they had traded their guns for liquor or some one had thoughtfully disarmed them for the time being.

"This," Betty said, bringing his mind back to the paper.

"I report the news, Betty. You have no right to ask me to change the policy of my paper."

Dude and Baldy stopped to stroke the burro's nose.

"Nishe lil old donkey," Dude crooned. "Alwaysh did like burrosh. Got a kind fashe." He looked up and saw Ben and Betty. Off came his hat. "Hiyuh, Miz Meehan! You married the whitesht man in the world. Congrat—congrat—congratulationsh!" he hiccuped.

The lank Baldy shouldered past Dude and threw his arms around Ben's neck.

"You ain't a bad guy, Bennie," he said. "You air Carl Meehan's kinfolk now, and that's enough for me. I had you all wrong, Bennie. I like you!"

Ben pushed Baldy back against the burro.

Both men looked at him in alarm.

"Get out!" he said, thickly. "Get out, you drunken bums!"

"Hey, we want to be your frienzh! Any frien' of Carlsh ish—"

"Get out!"

Betty screamed, "No, Ben—no!" as he ran to the desk, yanked open the drawer, and ran back with the .44 Gilmer had given him. Baldy jumped and began running as Ben fired blindly into the ground at his feet. He vanished, but Dude walked on at an infuriatingly slow pace. Ben fired into the ground behind him four times, saving the last bullet for a "happenable," as Jim taught him.

At the corner, Dude looked back and said soberly, "I'll get you for that, Lovejoy." Then he disappeared.

IX

USING a stick, Frank thumped the reluctant burro into motion. Ben went back to his desk and reloaded the gun. Betty followed him and sank into the swivel chair.

"Will you listen to me just once, before the train takes those papers away?"

"All right."

"Ben, if I give you my word never to see Carl again, will you burn the whole edition?"

"No."

"Ben," she pleaded, "look what you say—you hope that Carl has the same right to happiness."

"That's exactly what I hope, my dear."

"I love him more than anything else in the world, but I'll give him up forever if only you won't do this awful thing. Ben, if you let this paper go out, he'll have to come after you and make you take it back."

"I have never taken anything back."

"And you never will," she said hopelessly. "All right. I won't ask you again."

"Just a minute, and I'll go with you."

"You needn't bother."

"But I'm going home anyway, Betty. Or am I no longer welcome in my own house? First my friends have to go—then I."

"I'm sorry, Ben. You know I didn't mean it that way."

As they went out of the front door, Ogallala Schofield went down the other side of the street, tacking up badly painted MEEHAN FOR SENATOR signs.

"Wherever I go, Meehan goes ahead of me, Betty," Ben said.

"I'm proud if that's true."

"Sis, do you mind if I say something?"

"No."

"You'll make him a good wife. I—I never thought you had it in you."

She flushed.

"Neither did I," she whispered. "I'm sorry about it all, Ben. I want you two to like each other. I want you to keep your principles and I want Carl to keep his."

"But if we have to fight, whose side will you be on, little sister?"

He said it jokingly, but there were tears in her eyes as she buried her face in his sleeve.

"Carl's. You know that, Ben!"

He slept until midafternoon. A man's voice awakened him—a loud, raucous one on the front porch: "I don't care if he is asleep, I got to see him. Show me his room and I'll wake him up for sure. Your husband, ma'am, is a foxy one, and your brother's a blasted fool. Look at this here paper!"

"Will you please leave?" he heard Betty say haughtily.

Ben flung his old robe around him and got to the living room door, exploding into rage there. Windmill Collander had pushed into the room, still wearing his hat, still yelling at Betty. Windmill could bully a woman. He shut up when he saw Ben.

Off came his hat.

"That's better," Ben said. "Now, what the devil do you mean shouting at my sister?"

Betty disappeared quietly into the kitchen.

Windmill turned white.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lovejoy. I apologize, but I'm a worried man, a plumb worried man." He glanced down at the paper and grew angry again. "Meehan put you up to this! Why, you double-crosser, take my money and come out with somethin' like this!"

"Just a minute." Ben got between Windmill and the door. The fat man stood his ground stubbornly, but he was beginning to quake. "My sister's marriage has nothing to do with my policy."

"Then what about this?" Windmill wailed. "Look at what you wrote: 'Let's have judges with courage to decide land cases, which have been delayed far too long.' What a kind of a thing to write! I been stretchin' myself for years to keep them title cases from goin' to the Supreme Court. Once they're decided, the Gilmer Bill is sunk. What a smart feller you are!"

"That's enough." Ben took a step toward him.

WINDMILL trembled, but he did not move. "Get out of the house and never come here again," Ben said. "I have to deal with some queer people in my business, Collander, but I don't have to entertain them in my home. Get out."

"Now, wait a minute," Collander coaxed. "You and me has got to talk this over, so I can get back a report to Dallas."

"Get out."

"No," Collander almost sobbed. "I got to report and I got to get this straight with you."

He went white as Ben edged toward him. His big, flabby hand shook as it slid into his coat. Ben heard the click of the ingenious spring holster and found himself looking into the twin openings of Windmill's hand-made .32.

"You and me has got to talk," Windmill quavered, "so don't you take one more step!"

Ben took the step and the gun flared, and he thought wildly, The fool has shot me! He went light-blind and his forehead burned and the room echoed. Betty screamed and he heard odd footsteps on the porch.

Then he could see again. He ran his hand across his forehead and felt two tiny blisters, no more. Windmill was staring at the gun in his hand. The cuff of his coat sleeve trailed smoke, and Ben smelled the stink of burning flesh.

"What happened?" Betty screamed, in the doorway.

"She backfired on me," Windmill said stupidly, dropping the gun and wringing his burned hand. "Blowed out through the breech."

Ben picked up the gun and looked down the barrel.

"You're a dirty man, Collander, and you keep a dirty gun," he said. "Both barrels were plugged with lint. How long since you cleaned that filthy coat? You'd better get to a doctor—that hand is badly burned. Take your gun and get out."

"No! I wouldn't touch it again!" Collander shrank back from the weapon.

"It's a good gun. Keep it clean and

it will serve you well."

"No. Throw it away. I wasn't cut out for guns." Windmill lumbered toward the door, wringing his hand. "Look here, Mr. Lovejoy. Talk this over with Senator Gilmer, anyway. I'll stall off my man in Dallas."

"Send Gilmer to see me, if there has to be talk!"

"All right, all right!"

The fat man bolted out the door and Ben saw old Berea Hyde hopping down the steps. It was Berea's odd, thumping step he had heard.

"I don't ever want you on this property again, Hyde," Ben called after him.

Betty came to the doorway with him to watch the old dray team take Berea and Windmill down the road toward town and a doctor. She was calm enough now.

"He shot at you, didn't he, Ben?"

"That was his intention, generally," Ben said. He handed her the gun. "You're a Texas wife now. Let me give you a lesson Jim Agnew taught me. Keep your gun clean and your ammunition dry. I'll make you a present of this."

"I'll try to remember," she said, taking the gun. "Thank you so much. This is a lovely little gun."

"Odd, to hear a gun called lovely."

"Yes, isn't it?"

He caught her arm. "Betty, do we have to be at war like this? I'm sorry my friends have been insulting, both Gilmer and Collander. I want to talk to you. This morning you said something that led me to think you might be regretting your marriage."

She put the little gun against his stomach.

"That was this morning. I'll see us both dead before I'd betray Carl again, with any word. Don't ever say anything like that again."

It was then that they heard Frank coming, running hard. He pounded on the screen, and Betty put the little gun behind her.

"That's right, put it away until you know how to use it," Ben said. "A gun, Jim Agnew taught me, is a deadly weapon, not a device for illustrating a strong point of view."

"Senor Ben," Frank panted. "Come to thee bank, queeck! Somebody dead there. I think she's been rob. I don't stop to fin' out—I jus' come when they say somebody dead."

"Thanks, Frank. Wait for me."

HE pushed past Betty, ran to his room, and dressed quickly. With Frank at his side, they jogged down between the wheel tracks left by Berea Hyde's wagon.

The bank was on the corner near the Wigfall House, separated from it by a single building. At least seventy-five persons had collected before its locked door. Ben pushed through them and pounded on the door. Clyde Gilmer recognized him and opened it.

"Come in, Ben. The rest of you-all stay out." The door closed, and Ben was inside a dark, cool, oddly quiet room. "Here, Ben. Poor Homer's here at the desk."

"A stickup?" Ben asked, as he made out the body of the little banker, slumped over the desk.

"No, no. Homer seems to have shot himself. The girl found him when she come down this morning. Left no note but seems to done it yesterday. Went for his walk, came back, stopped in here and did it, and nobody has seen him since."

"Why, that would be immediately after he left my office!

"Yes. Understood he was in to see you."

Ben went closer to the body. Homer Frazer had been methodical in death as in life. Ben remembered the seedy, moth-eaten buffalo robe that had once hung in a corner of the room. It was down now, folded across the desk. Homer had laid his head on it and shot himself through the forehead. Where the robe had hung were two big indentations in the plaster.

"Hung this robe on the wall myself," Gilmer said, "after the Winton boys tried to hold us up. Those holes in the plaster—that's where I got Phil Winton

—that's his blood, that stain. Left it there as a warnin' to other robbers but it got so women hated to come in the bank, so I covered it with that robe."

He was talking erratically. Frazer's suicide had shaken him. Sheriff Hamp Smith came pushing through the crowd. Gilmer let him in. Hamp came straight toward Ben.

"Understand he spent some time with you just before he did this. Say anything to lead you to think he was figurin' on it?"

Ben tried to remember what the little banker had said. Yes, come to think of it, Frazer had been oddly excited, with his veiled warnings, his caustic references to the Texas Code. But suicide?

"No. He was a little excited, maybe, but seemed cheerful."

"I suppose you'll give me what-for over this, too."

"Why?"

"Well," Hamp complained, "you blame everything on the sheriff, don't you? I'm the whippin' boy for your paper, ain't I?"

Out in the street a woman screamed. They recognized her voice—Mrs. H. Peter Ferree, the Irish wife of the Frenchman who pumped water for the railroad standpipe. Gilmer went to the door.

"Is the bank broke?" she screeched at him. "Oh, the spalpeen, to steal me money and then shoot himself!"

"There's nothing wrong with the bank, Sadie," Gilmer said. "At least, we don't think so. We'll audit the books as soon as we can, but I promise you this —as far as my money and property goes, the bank will pay off its depositors."

"Glory and hosanna!" she screamed. "I knew we could count on yez for the honorable thing!"

Gilmer closed the door, and the crowd fell back a little, trusting him. He turned to the frightened young teller.

"Lock those books in the vault, every paper you can find. We'll have a meeting of the board soon as we can, but I'm going to wire auditors from Dallas or Houston to get here—yes, and the national bank examiners, too. Let's get a hustle on, boy! Lock everything in the vault while I write out them wires. We got thousands of poor people worried about where their money went."

As he sat down at the desk, Windmill Collander pounded on the door. At Gilmer's nod, Ben let him in. Collander's hand was newly bandaged. His face was white.

"What's wrong?" He slumped against the wall as he saw the body, with Gilmer sitting calmly across from it. "My Lord, then it's true! How much is missing?"

"Not a cent, that we know of," Ben said.

Gilmer went on writing.

"Thank the Lord for that!" Collander sighed. "I can't stand dead people but I could go right up and kick him in the pants, if the bank's in bad shape. That's all we need, a bank failure in the middle of the campaign. What a rotten time to kill himself."

Gilmer stood up. He came over without a word and picked up Collander and hurled him toward the door. The strength in his huge arms was incredible.

Collander lit on his knees, squealing like a rabbit.

"Get out!" Gilmer roaded. "There's a dead man in here who was my friend. You smell up the place!"

Collander scuttled out, Gilmer went back to the desk, and Ben thought, I've never liked the big fellow quite so much as now. He's a lot of man, at that!

X

SICK at heart, Ben helped them carry Homer's body down to the depot. Like Roy Nennet, the banker would have to detour by way of Douglas, on his way to the grave.

Gilmer seemed deeply disturbed by the little man's death.

"I got few friends, that I can talk to like a friend," he told Ben, sadly. "Worse than that, the bank'll miss him. Folks claimed I run that bank. I didn't!

I could say aye or nay, but I'm no banker and Homer was. Where'll we find his like again?"

They were standing in the little depot office, while old Berea Hyde tapped out the barrage of telegrams Gilmer had ordered. One was to the national bank examiner. One went to a firm of public accountants in Dallas.

But the one that most astonished Ben went to the division office of the P. D. & R. V. in Douglas. It demanded that a special funeral train be sent to bear Frazer's body to Douglas ahead of all other traffic!

Hyde, hunched over the telegraph key, pounded away swiftly. Ben was a telegrapher himself—no man could call himself an all-around newspaper man unless he could "play a tune on a key." But he had trouble keeping up with Berea, who was fast and accurate.

"I got Smothers, the Division Superintendent, on the other end," Berea said, turning around. He looked straight through Ben, ignoring him. "He says he'd have to make the Flyer go into a siding to give you a funeral train. Says he just can't see his way clear to do it."

Gilmer yawned and said, "Ask him if he wants me to go to President O'Malley. O'Malley's in Dallas, remind him of that."

"Yes, sir."

Berea turned to his key and tapped out, "Senator asks shall he go O'Malley Dallas," and swiftly the message came back, "Not necessary. Funeral train departs, special redball orders, five minutes. Regards Senator Gilmer, glad serve him, call any time."

Superintendent Smothers, at his key in Douglas, was not quite as fast as Berea. Ben, smiling, read the message aloud as it came clicking into the little office—something he should not have done, he realized, when he saw the hate-look blacken on Berea's face. Gilmer nodded.

"Let's go to your office, Ben. Quick as you get anything on the funeral special, B'rea, send word."

"Yes, sir," Berea said.

They strolled back toward town. Every hitch-rail in town was full. Swifter than Berea Hyde's Morse wires was the "sagebrush telegraph," over which the news of Homer Frazer's suicide had gone almost instantaneously.

There were three places they congregated—in front of the bank, at the Wigfall, and before the *Signal*. Ben and Gilmer, pacing slowly toward the *Signal* office, were stopped a dozen times.

"Hear you said you'd toss your property into the pot if the bank's shaky, Senator."

"You heard right! But I don't think there's anything wrong with the bank. Homer was the best there was and I can't find evidence of any loss."

"Can—can I take my money out? It ain't that I'm scared, Senator. Only, me and the old lady—well, we just saved up a few dollars for a happenable."

"No. Let me know how much it was and I'll advance you that much out of my own pocket. But I'm not going to let a run start. The bank's closed and only the Board can open it. How much do you want?"

The last question, asked in a peremptory trumpeting voice, always brought the same answer: "Oh, well, I guess I'll let mine lay. Take my chances with the rest."

They got to the office at last, and found Betty waiting for them. Most of those gathered around the *Signal* office appeared to be Meehan men. This crowd, at least fifty strong, shot their questions at Ben.

"Say, now, was that little pot-fronted city slicker crooked, or wasn't he? Is it true she'll only pay twenty cents on the dollar? How big is the loot? Hear the Board of Directors is meetin' tonight to hire somebody to go through the books. Who are they goin' to get to do it and how we know he's fair and squar'?"

"Nobody knows the answers—yet," Ben told them, with his back to his own door. "I'm no banker and I'll have to wait for expert opinion, the same as you. Now, do you want to know what I *think*? I think the bank will be found to be sound. I think Mr. Frazer's suicide was for personal, private reasons. I

think the man who started that twenty-cents-on-the-dollar rumor ought to be horse-whipped."

THEN he saw Carl Meehan shouldering his way through the crowd, and behind him a small figure in brown silk. He got his first good look at Laura Bratton, and for a moment he forgot everything that had happened that morning, in the shock her face gave him.

He had heard that Laura was pretty. He knew his own sister was pretty, in a quiet, sensible, demure way, and he had unconsciously visualized Mrs. Bratton in the same mould. But this woman —this small, sturdy, erect, well-formed little thing—this woman was lovely, beautiful as the ancients must have envisioned their goddesses! He had never seen eyes so large, nor skin so perfect. Her nose was small, her mouth large and perfectly curved. Her throat above the stiff silk collar had little hollows and flutings and delicate lines that caught and held both sunlight and shadows.

He had seen Betty through the window. She had come down loyally because there would be work to be done. He wondered now if she would come out and stand beside him, or go to her new husband—or stay where she was.

Beside him, Senator Gilmer stiffened and his breath came hard and noisily, like a bull's.

Meehan plowed a way through the crowd until no one stood between him and Ben. Behind him came Mrs. Bratton, and across the street Ben could see five men clustered around seven Etcetera horses. If Mrs. Bratton had stopped to change clothes, none of her men had. Meehan apparently had not even shaved, and trail-dust lay thick in his heavy stubble of beard.

That was Clip Foshay, powerful, bulky, fearless, challenging, standing over there across the street with a pearl-handled .45 swinging on his hip. His big hands were bunched in fists, his hat pushed back on his head, his jaws going strongly on their eternal cud of eatin' tobacco.

That smallish figure beside him—that was Shorty, the little man who had killed Roy Nennet with a .22, and who had not showed himself in Sunup since. Shorty, little more than a freckled boy now that Ben got a good look at him, looked scared.

The third man, Ben didn't know, but he saw Dude Smith and Baldy Wolf. They were riding Etcetera horses now. They had found where they belonged and were sobering up swiftly under the pressure of excitement.

A minute passed, and Ben heard Betty open the door behind him and stand where she could be seen clearly by the crowd, between him and Gilmer.

"That's pretty strong talk, Ben," Meehan said, not easily, not gently, and on the other hand, not belligerently. "You're still a stranger and maybe you don't yet know what horse-whippin' means here. Speakin' strictly for myself, I'd say that any man who prophesied twenty cents on the dollar deserves a solid gold medal for truth, rather than a hidin'."

"That's an infamous slander!" Gilmer bellowed. "If I don't know what's on the books, you sure don't, you quarter-breed trouble-maker. Make your play! Ben's right—a touch of the horse-whip would make a good Indian out of you."

"Maybe you'd like to give it to me?" Meehan drawled, but he went white around the corners of his mouth. His eyes had narrowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed nervously in his throat.

"Get out of my way, please!" Betty said shrilly behind them.

She pushed between them and crossed the intervening space between her and her husband. By her paleness, by the trembling of her lower lip, by the deathly panic in her eyes, Ben knew what it was costing her. She took three long, swift strides and took her husband's arm, and as she turned to face Ben and Gilmer she said, over her shoulder, "Hello, Laura. Nice to see you," as though greeting her at an afternoon tea.

Meehan did not look at Betty. His arm twitched, and she clung to it, and it twitched again, and he said savagely,

out of the side of his mouth, "Betty, let go and stand aside." Betty's pallor fled and color darkened her cheeks as she learned her first lesson in how to be a Texas wife—never encumber your husband's arm when he may need it.

SHE dropped back a step and her hand sought Laura Bratton's. The two women clung together as Meehan took another step forward.

"You called me a name I don't like, Gilmer," he said, between his teeth. "You made some pretty big talk about horse-whippin'. I want you to come out here and back it up, or get down on your hands and knees."

Ben pushed in between them, one arm against Meehan's chest, one against Gilmer's.

"Clear out—clear out, all of you!" he said sharply. "Personal grudges can be settled some other time. Mr. Meehan, what business is it of yours about the bank?"

"Just this," Meehan said, gulping down obvious raw temper. "Just this—I swapped six hundred acres of land for five shares of bank stock and Mrs. Bratton owns fifty. They can assess the tar out of us to make up what's short at the bank."

Gilmer cleared his throat and looked over Meehan's head to the crowd. He said, "I've repeated this a dozen times and I'll repeat it again—I'll throw everything I own into the pot if it's needed to square accounts with depositors. I don't know how much I can sell out for—your guess is as good as mine. If it's not enough, they may have to assess the stockholders. At this moment, I herewith make a public offer to buy Carl Meehan's five shares and Mrs. Bratton's fifty shares of stock at market value plus five dollars a share extra."

There was silence for a moment, and then from across the street Clip Foshay called warningly, "Don't sell, Carl—don't sell! Keep your own shares, anyhow. Keep a clutch on that bank."

"Put up or shut up," Gilmer said, and Meehan looked up, shook his head with a humorless smile and called out, "Buying us out dodges the issue, Senator. I wasn't one of them that damned Homer Frazer. In his way, Homer was all right! He might of been your errand-boy, your spittoon-cleaner, but he knew bankin'. There's a crooked ace in the deck somewhere and I aim to force it out."

His glance swept to Ben.

"All right, Ben," he went on, calmly enough. "You get your way this mornin'. Let's leave her just as she lays now. I say twenty cents on the dollar and I bet I ain't far wrong, and I don't know any more about bankin' than a hog does about Sunday. Soon as this bank mess is cleared up, Clyde will get down on his knees and swallow his gab or I'll lay a blacksnake whip across his back and run him the length of Sunup. And you better not horn in a second time."

"The bank," Gilmer said, "comes first. Let's keep personal and political grudges out of it."

"You're late with that," Meehan drawled, "but you got the general idea." He turned to the crowd and said, "Who's in favor of a stockholders' meetin'? How about tomorrow night, in the schoolhouse? If the Board of Directors hasn't met by then, it's their funeral. Whose bank is it?"

"I'm in favor of that, too!" Gilmer shouted, over the roar of the crowd, which had tripled in size as people poured toward the *Signal* office from all over town. "Everybody who owns stock be at the schoolhouse tomorrow night."

He turned abruptly and went into the newspaper office. Ben waited to see what Betty would do. She gave him one or two helpless looks—he could not figure out what they meant.

Then, with Laura Bratton on one side and Meehan on the other, she moved away with the crowd.

Collander had been right about one thing.

Meehan was a dangerous candidate, a natural leader.

"What does she see in him?" Gilmer said. "What is the matter with the woman?" Gilmer was still fuming when Ben

came inside and closed the door. "He's a married man now, but did you see the looks she gave him?"

"Who?"

"Laura Bratton—Mrs. Bratton. She never opened her mouth. Let Meehan do everything. Anything Meehan wants, that seems to be all right with her. What does she see in him?"

BEN, remembering Laura Bratton's small, sturdy, lovely figure, the cameolike perfection of her face, said, in a troubled voice, "I don't know. Maybe women see things differently than you and I."

Gilmer's head sank gradually, and his mouth shaped itself into a pouting expression Ben did not like.

Frank came in with old Jim Agnew. Jim had shaved and put on a clean shirt. He was stone sober for the first time since Ben had known him.

Gilmer teased him gruffly, "Hello, Jim, what's the occasion? Wouldn't know you in a crowd of city poops."

"Ben might need backin' up," Jim said.

"Takin' sides, are you?"

"Now, Clyde, you know I never take sides."

Ben had a feeling he should resent the old gunnie's care, but he did not.

"Jim," he said, "dont' let Clyde get your goat. He's just a dime-a-dozen politician and we do him a favor just being sociable."

It was Texas-talk, and the first time it had ever come easily to his tongue. Gilmer laughed, and the three forgot briefly that a little chubby man's suicide had clamped a chill over Sunup.

* * * * *

The same crowd stayed to see the funeral train puff in and puff away again, flying long black streamers and carrying Homer Frazer's body. Ben had seen other banks go broke. He knew what it could do to a community.

Sunup's whole heart stopped beating. It did not pulse again until the auditor who was to check the books of the bank came in on the Flyer. He came up from the depot only an hour after Homer Frazer's body left it, with Gilmer on one side and Ogalla Schofield on his other. He was a tiny, inoffensive little man with ice-cold eyes behind thick glasses, and he looked entirely too calm, caught between two factions as he was.

Ben saw him go to the Wigfall House for supper. The crowd would wait for his report. Men and women trickled back to their wagons and buggies, and Ben went home and smelled Laura Bratton's perfume in his house.

Perfume? The woman herself seemed to be there, somehow. He could almost see her still in the room.

Betty had left a lamp burning, as usual. He looked from chair to chair, trying to imagine where the two women had sat.

"Let me get this straight," he said to himself. "Am I falling in love with her, after seeing her so little? A man can be reasonable about love."

Betty came to the door, still fully

[*Turn page*]

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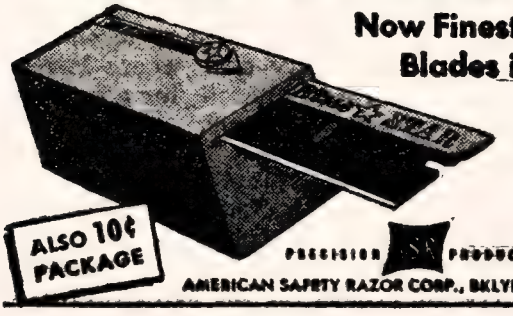
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dressed, but with her eyes full of sleep.

"I dozed off. Did I hear a train, or was I dreaming?"

"Yes, the Flyer came in, after the funeral train." He had to hold back a yearning to ask her about Laura.

She came up to him. "Ben, are you awfully angry for what I did at the shop?"

"A little, maybe," he said, wearily, "but I guess your place was at his side. Frankly, I didn't think you had the nerve."

"Carl hated that. It shamed him to have you see it. But he feels he owes more to the depositors than to his family."

She gulped at the word. He said goodnight and headed for his room, still wishing she would say something about Laura Bratton.

"One other thing," her voice followed him. "I asked Laura to come here after we left the print shop. I didn't think you would refuse the shelter of your home to any woman."

"Of course not," he said stiffly.

He escaped to his room and sat thinking about her, and cursed bitterly when he heard Windmill Collander's voice on the porch again.

"After Mrs. Bratton, that fat, repulsive grubworm!"

HE went to the door in a bad temper. "Now what?"

"Mr. Lovejoy, I'm sorry I fired at you. I wonder if you'd put me up tonight?" Collander pleaded. "I don't dare sleep in a hotel tonight, with all the drinkin' and carousin' there is."

"They threatened you?" Ben groaned. "All right, come in."

Collander almost jumped through the door.

"You like it straight. No, I can't say I was threatened, not directly. It was just one of them situations where every time I went some place, those fellers just stopped talkin', and looked."

Boots thudded on the porch.

"They're a-comin' to lynch me!"

"No one is going to take you out of my house, you fool!" Ben said.

He opened the door to old Jim Agnew, drunk again.

"Seen the fat feller come a-waddlin' up here and I wondered if maybe you don't need me, Mr. Lovejoy."

"That's all right, Jim. You go home and sleep it off."

"Sleep it off?" Jim brayed. "I ain't drunk! I come here to offer to help you. Some of the boys are talkin' about givin' the fat party a ride out of town on a rail."

Collander wailed, "See? I knowed I wasn't safe."

"I'll doze off here among the trees," Jim said. "Nobody can get past me. Don't you worry. Get some sleep, Mr. Lovejoy."

He went down the steps steadily, and Ben closed the door.

"Windmill, you're the worst coward I ever saw."

"Maybe I am," Windmill admitted. "I'm not built for fightin'. I may be heavy, but I'm puny. I'll bunk right here on the floor."

"I'll share my bed with you. Come on."

"Thank you!" Windmill heaved a sigh of relief. "I know these frontier crowds. Long about midnight they start lookin' for somebody to do a Colt hornpipe. Know what that is? They shoot a forty-five at your heels and make you dance."

Ben led the way to his room, wondering how many Colt's hornpipes the man had danced to save his fat hide.

XI

IT became known that the auditor's name was Cecil Stainer. He seemed to know his business. Ben watched him work, at the very desk where Homer Frazer had shot himself, for a few moments the next morning.

Besides the bank's staff, two other men had been admitted by Gilmer. These were Seth Nennet and Ogallala Schofield.

There was nothing Ben could learn yet. He headed for the print shop. Gil-

mer followed him part of the way. In contrast to yesterday, hardly anyone was on the street.

"How does it look so far?" Ben asked.

"The bank? Oh, she's sound as a dollar," Gilmer assured him. "We usually carried around thirty thousand in cash, but last week got in nearly that much more and no chance yet to ship it to Douglas or Frohler. That's what I worried about. They checked it this morning and every dime is here—sixty-three thousand dollars."

Ben whistled.

"That's a lot of money."

"Well, folks here like hard cash. Bank's young, and it takes a spell for folks to get used to drafts and checks. But that ain't what I wanted to talk to you about. Seth Nennet has come out for Meehan! The depositors picked him and Schofield to check the auditor, Stainer. You can figure how I felt when Seth came out as a Meehan inspector. When people start switchin' this early in a campaign, it's bad."

"Yes it is. What reason does he give?"

"I asked him," Gilmer grumbled, "and he whines, well, Roy was always for me but he reckons he'll drag along with the Etcetera, because the Eecetera boys never got no fair shake from Roy."

"Meaning he's afraid of them." Ben laughed. "Well, that's why they killed Roy—to scare people. I told you how to fix that—clamp down with the law!"

"Son," Gilmer said, "Texas has always been run by strength, and I'm strongest here. Law, nothing! I can wipe that outfit off the face of the earth and I'm goin' to do it! Wants trouble, does she? Well, she'll get it! The Circle G ran this country once and it can do it again."

Ben went to the office. In a little while people began gathering in front of his window. Each time he showed his face they asked him, "What's the news from the bank? How much is missin'?"

Each time he told them, "You know as much about it as I do. We'll get the whole story this evening. In the meantime, my hunch is—don't worry."

When he went home he found Collander shaking with apprehension over the same question: "How much is missing?"

"Not a cent, so far as I can tell." He gave Windmill all the information he had. "I'll bet if anything was wrong, Schofield would have been out there blaring the news like the company bugler."

Jim Agnew had vanished during the night. He was sitting on the front steps, however, when Ben came out after eating lunch. The old gunman fell in step with Ben and walked silently back to the *Signal* office. He sat in a corner there, half drunk and half sober, the old notched .45 at his hip, and said not a word.

By midafternoon, Circle G riders were beginning to appear in town. They had come straight from work. They were dusty and dirty and hilarious at the unexpected holiday. They moved other people's horses without permission and took over the rail in front of the Wigfall.

There was no sign of Meehan and the Etcetera hands.

Gilmer appeared twice, going into the Wigfall—for what? Ben wondered. It seemed to him that the Circle G boys got drunk, but not too drunk. At least two fights started, but stopped quickly. The Circle G boys held the saloon like a fort.

THE presence of the Circle G seemed to give Windmill Collander courage to leave Ben's house. Ben saw him go into the Wigfall bar, where he was greeted with a raucous whoop. In a little while he came out, smiling, and crossed to Ben's office.

"A show of strength is what was needed. Those boys are ripe for a sandy. Let's see Meehan start somethin' now!"

"Where's the sheriff?" Ben asked him.

"Never mind the sheriff! Let him keep out of sight. Look at that town, now! Can't you just *feel* the excitement? We got 'em on the run, Mr. Lovejoy! This is the luckiest thing ever happened, Frazer killin' himself, the way it turned out."

Ben looked at him in disgust, but he could feel the truth behind the fat man's

words. Yes, he could feel it. There was no way to describe the thing that had hold of the town. It was not just mob hysteria, not just fear, not just curiosity. It was a strange, rowdy, warlike Texas thing, that went down the street like a huge, invisible plow, cutting a deep furrow that separated it into two hate-hot camps.

The Wigfall House was a symbol. Seth Nennet, a Meehan man, owned it, but the Circle G held it, and when Ben went in for a drink before supper, a Circle G cowboy was behind the bar.

"Where's Seth?" Ben asked.

"Not here, that's a cinch," the man behind the bar drawled. "And he better not show up. Clyde fixed it so we can drink our best. He'll pay old Grandma Seth Nennet tomorrow."

Ben had his drink and watched them for a few moments. They were armed to the teeth. Beneath their hilarity was a tense purposefulness.

On the hotel side it was a different story. No Circle G men ventured into the north door, which opened on the hotel lobby. When Ben tried to pass through the connecting door, he found it locked. He looked in at the lobby from the street. Sheriff Hamp Smith was sitting there, looking gloomy and worried. He was entirely alone.

Cecil Stainer came out of the bank as Ben passed it.

"Mr. Lovejoy!" he called. "Beg pardon, but I understand you come from Vermont, and have a sister named Betty."

"That's right."

"What a coincidence. You owned a paper in Hotchkissville, Connecticut, about eleven years ago, too, didn't you?"

"Ran it for a man who was sick. I was a young fellow then."

"Then Miss Lovejoy was the girl who came to visit my sister. You see, I'm from Hotchkissville. Perhaps you'll remember a canary my sister gave yours."

Ben remembered then—a pale, timid little boy who read Wild West and bandit stories, and who wanted to grow up to be a highwayman.

They shook hands, and Ben felt uncomfortable as he had to explain, "My sister was just married to Mr. Meehan, Senator Gilmer's election opponent. Will you have dinner with the two of us? She—she's still at my home."

"Delighted."

They walked up to the house together. Betty remembered Stainer instantly. It was a pleasant supper. Betty lit candles in a long row on the table, and the three New Englanders forgot, for a while, that they were in Texas. They forgot banks, and killings, and sudden, fratricidal elections.

As he and Stainer set out for the schoolhouse, after dark, Ben wondered what had become of Windmill Collander. The fat man had simply disappeared. Old Jim Agnew, not quite drunk yet, plodded down the path after them.

"My bodyguard," Ben explained. "Used to be a two-gun man."

"Indeed?" Stainer asked, excitedly.

They reached the street just as the Et-cetera crew thundered into town. Laura herself was at the head, making Ben feel unsure of himself, excited, again. Beside and a little behind her rode Carl Meenan and Clip Foshay.

Ben would have passed with only a tip of his hat for Mrs. Bratton, but Meehan stood up in the stirrups, hauled in his horse, and called his name.

"Ben! Ben Lovejoy, there!"

"Yes, Mr. Meehan?"

MEEHAN rode over until his wild horse rested its front hoofs on the sidewalk.

"Howdy. I want to ask a favor, Ben. The Circle G is here in a herd and it might get ugly. I wonder, could I take Mrs. Bratton up to the house and leave her with Bet—with your sister?"

Ben, with the same cool civility, said, "It'll be a privilege and a pleasure. Mrs. Bratton is riding and I'm afoot. If you will be good enough to take her up to the house, I'll be grateful."

Meehan flushed. "Thanks. Ben, I ain't very good at sayin' my mind, but I want you to know—well, hard feelin's or no about Betty and me gettin' married, I knew I could count on you for this.

You're my kind of a man."

They looked at each other uncomfortably. Jim Agnew came out of the shadows. Meehan seemed relieved at the interruption.

"Hiyuh, Don Carlos," Jim shouted. *"Buenas tardes, Don Jaime. Como 'sta usted?"*

"Tolerable, tolerable," Jim said. "You want me to take Laura up to Ben's house? You keep with your boys, Carl. Weather's kind of triggerish. I'll land the lady safely." He turned to Ben. "I'll stick around up there. Two lone women in a house ain't good, with all the likker bein' drunk tonight."

"Thanks, Jim," Ben and Meehan said at the same time.

Jim took Mrs. Bratton's bridle and walked along beside her. The woman nodded coolly to Ben, and he met her eyes briefly. Her laugh floated back.

She and Jim seemed to be on first-name terms. A man's woman.

Meehan wheeled his men and led them past the long line of Circle G horses to the livery stable. Clip Foshay spurred aside to lean over and prop Dorcas Wintergreen's little .22 up against the door of his shop. The livery stable man came running to the door, shouting, "Full up, full up, Meehan. Couldn't find room for a short pony."

Dust swirled chokingly as Meehan and his twelve men reined in. "Couldn't be we ain't welcome?" Meehan drawled.

"Wait, I want to watch this," Stainer whispered, as Ben would have moved on.

The liveryman shook his head. Ben knew him only slightly, as a close-mouthed, hard-working, money-making business man. "If you wasn't welcome, Carl," the liveryman said, "I'd say that. I'll vote for you but dad-burned if I move another man's horse out for ary person on earth. I'm full up, I said." Here was another man who had switched against Gilmer, Ben thought.

Meehan touched his crumpled old hat, nodding. "That suits me, Tony. We'll tie elsewhere. A tall Christmas and a copious Fourth of July to you, son."

They grinned at each other. Meehan spun his wild horse.

"Tie on the lot next to the *Signal*, boys," he yelled, "and I'll whip the first man who crosses the street or takes a pick at the Circle G men on the other side."

They thundered up the street.

"That," Ben said uncomfortably, "is my sister's new husband. There is still rather a strain on the family tie. That is why I did not introduce you."

Stainer stood looking at the twelve men pounding up the street.

"What a man!" he said reverently.

They walked along to the school. Half a block behind them came the Etcetera bunch, afoot, and silent now. Sunup's new school had two small cloakrooms, one on each side of the front door. Lurking in one was Hamp Smith. In the other cloakroom was a stranger wearing a deputy's badge. Hamp nodded to Ben, who went on in and took a seat in the audience while Stainer went up on the platform.

Clyde Gilmer's towering form dominated the room. Gilmer had hung his gun over a chair in the corner. His face turned brick-red when he saw Meehan and the Etcetera riders stalk silently in, armed to the teeth, but he said nothing. There were not enough empty seats to accommodate the newcomers. Meehan led them down the right wall, where they stood, leaning against the wall in a grim line.

"Howdy," Gilmer said, after a pause. "You'll want to come up here in front, Meehan. The rest of us have taken off our guns."

"Thanks, Clyde," Meehan replied easily. "It's your bank, your funeral. We'll just listen, thank you kindly."

"But you'll probably want to leave off those guns."

Gilmer was swallowing his temper with difficulty.

"Thanks," Meehan repeated. "I see the Circle G boys are in town. We'll wait and see what they do when they get here."

Gilmer shrugged. Ogallala Schofield and Seth Nennet came hurrying down the aisle. They clumped to the platform and took seats.

After them came the Circle G riders. They paused inside the door, saw the Etcetera crowd on the east wall and, without a word, filed down the opposite one. They stood there awkwardly, and Ben was surprised at how sober they were.

XII

GRIM-FACED, Hamp Smith appeared in the doorway and made his way slowly to the platform. Men in the audience got up, tapped their wives' shoulders, and began moving out of the room.

"No need for you family folks to leave. This is a peaceable meetin'," Hamp called.

They hesitated at the doorway.

"I see more than thirty fellers here with guns; that doesn't look peaceable to me," one old overalled rancher called.

"I see the same thing. Meehan, I want your fellers to hand over their weapons to me. My deputy will collect them from the Circle G. You can have 'em back when I think it's safe." Old Hamp suddenly seemed to have a bull's brute will, a bull's courage, from where Ben sat. "This," he bellowed, "isn't a request, gents. It's an order."

A Circle G man laughed raucously. Hamp paid no attention to him. The deputy hesitated in the door at the rear of the room. The laughing man stopped laughing as Clyde Gilmer took a quick step toward the edge of the platform.

Meehan thrust himself lazily away from the wall. His hands dropped slowly to the clasp of his gun-belt. He held the belt, holster and gun toward the sheriff.

"Here you are, Hamp. So long as it's sauce for the gander."

Slowly the Etcetera men unbuckled their guns. No similar move came from the Circle G bunch until suddenly Gilmer's roar filled the room: "Arny!"

One word—and the foreman, called Arny, jumped as though hit by a whip. Quickly the Circle G men stripped off their guns. Hamp and the deputy collected them, in silence. The little clump of men and women waiting at the back of the room returned to their seats, still in silence.

It seemed to Ber that danger had not been averted, but merely postponed.

Gilmer rapped on the teacher's desk with his knuckles. "You all know what this meetin' is for. When Homer Frazer killed himself a lot of us got worried about the bank. I brought in an auditor, and you'll be glad to hear he says it's sound."

A little sigh ran around the room.

"C. C. Schofield and Seth Nennet looked over his shoulders while he went through them books," Gilmer went on. "You'll get his report, but you want to know one thing—can the bank pay off? Well, friends, she can—dollar for dollar."

A ripple of applause started somewhere in the room. It died as Meehan stepped away from the wall, holding up his hand.

"You mean if people come around tomorrow, Clyde, you'll pay back the money they got on deposit."

Gilmer turned red. His mouth worked.

"I mean just that!" His voice rose. "You made your remarks about ten or twenty cents on the dollar, Meehan, where everybody could hear. It does my heart good to tell you in front of everybody that you got those words to eat. Dollar for dollar, she's all accounted for, down to the last cent."

His voice rose still higher. His tall form trembled and he raised a clenched fist. He had waited for this moment a long time.

"It appears that Homer killed himself for personal reasons. The bank had nothin' to do with it. When I wasn't sure, I took your guff. Now you'll take some! Come up here and apologize to a dead man—the finest man that ever took care of other people's money for 'em."

Meehan seemed unsure of himself, as he groped for words.

"Wait a minute, Clyde, before we talk of apologizin'. Now if the depositors

come around and demand their money, you'll pay?"

"Dollar for dollar."

"Understand there's a hundred and thirty-five thousand in deposits. You'll pay all of that?"

"Every cent."

"Tomorrow? Fast as they line up?"

GILMER choked and clenched his fists. "You blamed fool," he said distinctly, "if you had any brains—if you was anything but a big-mouthed, trouble-makin' breed rider, you'd know nobody ever carries that much specie and currency in a vault. There's sixty-three thousand in U. S. money, three times as much as you'll find in any bank in Texas the size of this one."

Meehan flinched and darkened.

"Keep to facts," he said. "That's less than half the deposits. Where's the rest of it?"

Gilmer struggled with himself a moment. Then he looked out over the crowd with angry amusement.

"This," he said, "is a devil of a time to teach you bankin'. I'll let Mr. Stainer tell you. These folks want information."

The little auditor came to the edge of the platform with a paper in his hands. To Ben he seemed perfectly cool. His dry, metallic voice rattled like an adding-machine.

"Total deposits, one hundred and thirty-six thousand, seven hundred and eighty-four dollars and seven cents. Total capital, seventy thousand. Accounts payable, including due-bills of other lending institutions, unpaid drafts, and so forth. nine thousand, four hundred and thirty-five dollars and eighteen cents. There seem to be no other liabilities.

"Total liabilities, therefore, are two hundred and sixteen thousand, two hundred dollars and twenty-five cents. Against this we find assets of two hundred and eighty-seven thousand one hundred and eleven dollars and forty-four cents. In other words, your bank has a net worth of seventy thousand, eight hundred and ninety-two dollars and nineteen cents.

"I have simplified this report in the same manner you would balance your own business affairs. A more detailed report will be available tomorrow. Thank you."

He started back toward the chair. Meehan's voice stopped him.

"Yes, sir?" the bank examiner said inquiringly.

"What we want to know," Meehan yelled, "is how you're goin' to pay that other seventy-odd thousand dollars? You bring that report down to our kind of language, Mr. Man. Tell us this—where's the money?"

"Hold it!" Clyde Gilmer roared, coming between them. "Mr. Stainer's job is done. If you can't get it through your thick Injun head, Meehan, I'll explain it to you:

"By the time we run out of hard money here, we would have transferred paper assets and collateral to the banks at Douglas and Frohler and Ennis and Dallas, where we do business, and they'd ship us hard money here as fast as the trains can run."

"I still want to know—"

"You still want to make trouble!" Gilmer bellowed. "I don't want to hear no more from you, Meehan."

Meehan slouched toward the platform. "Well, you'll hear anyhow. I want to know where that money is, and by the eternal, I'll find out. You can't pay off nobody with figures. Ogallala, you saw sixty-three thousand in the vault?"

"Why, yes, Carl—I did," Schofield said, uncertainly.

"You see where the rest of it went, Ogallala?"

"Well-l-l—" Schofield had been sure of himself up to this moment. He had stood at Cecil Stainer's side until the little auditor's figures convinced him. Now he was asking himself what, after all, had been proved?

"Well, they got notes receivable, and mortgages on property around here—I got a mortgage myself in there—that's one of the assets they could raise money on, see—"

"This isn't a penny-ante poker game," Gilmer cut in. "How much you got com-

ing, Meehan? I'll buy you out double and get you out of honest men's way, you dirty ignorant breed—"

Meehan's hand came up like a striking snake and hit Gilmer on the mouth, hard.

THE slap cracked like a pistol and Circle G men began flowing along the wall, edging toward the platform. Etcetera men fanned into a bunch behind Meehan but he held them off, holding out both arms to stop them.

"Nothing doing, boys," he cried. "Nothing here Clyde and I can't settle personally." His voice had an odd carrying ring to it, despite the quaver of temper. "Anybody who starts trouble here is buttin' into a private fight that's got nothin' to do with this bank meetin'. Clyde called me a name and got his mouth hit—that's all. If he's a man he'll keep it personal."

Gilmer rubbed his slapped mouth. There was blood on his teeth and his freckles stood out on a white face.

Meehan spun and looked up at him. "I've taken your insults so far, Clyde, because I didn't want the election fight to get personal, but it can go to pot before I take any more. I came here to talk money, and you won't talk. You put this little squirt of an auditor up here to give us a lot of figures, and you won't tell us where the money's gone. If folks want to take your figures, I'm licked, I can't do any more. But don't you make free with me personally again, Clyde, unless you're ready to back it up."

Ben thought he saw defeat in both men. It was a funny thing—Meehan had lost ground and prestige, Gilmer had made a fool of him, and yet Gilmer looked as broken as Meehan! The Senator looked over Meehan's head and spoke in a quiet, unsteady voice.

"Anybody got any more questions? Sorry it had to turn out this way, folks. The Board of Directors will meet tomorrow mornin' and anybody who wants to be paid off can get their money."

"Bet my last dollar there's no run on the bank," Ben said to himself, watching the people file out of the room.

Meehan said quietly, "Come on boys. Let's get our iron works and go home. Don't start anything."

Clip Foshay glared across the room at the Circle G men. He seemed to hesitate, but as Meehan started down the wall, Clip followed him. Hamp Smith met them at the door.

"Suppose you boys get your horses and meet me down at the depot for these guns."

"Suppose you hand over our guns right now!" Clip blared.

"Easy, Clip," Meehan warned him. "Better give us our guns, Hamp. I give you my word we won't start anythin'."

"All right," the sheriff said. "Your word's good, Carl."

HURRYING down to the *Signal* office, Ben heard the Etcetera crew clumping along behind him. They had little to say. As Ben went into his office, Meehan and his riders got their horses from the lot next door and filed silently out into the street.

There was no sign of the Circle G crew, which evidently had remained back at the schoolhouse.

They'll have to go past my place for Mrs. Bratton, Ben thought, as he set to work.

What would Meehan say to Betty? What would be his story of his defeat? For defeat it was. People might recognize him as a brave man, an honest man, one of great personal integrity. But they must also ask themselves, "What does he know about banking, about business? What good can he do us in the senate?"

What puzzled Ben was Gilmer's attitude. He had won. Why, then, didn't he look like a winner?

What had Homer Frazer been trying to tell Ben, that last hour of his life?

"I'm missing something. Frazer had something on his mind. What was it? He was trying to tell me something without betraying anybody, and I didn't get it," Ben said, over and over. "And all I can think of now is Laura Bratton, Laura Bratton, Laura Bratton!"

XIII

MONOTONOUSLY, noisily, the presses were turning by midnight. Windmill Collander came in to see the paper, looking sleepy and scared. He read avidly. Ben had divided the story into two parts. One dealt with the suicide only, and was headed:

FRAZER OF SUNUP BANK DIES BY OWN HAND!

The other dealt in detail with the audit of the bank's books, and was headed:

EXPERT DECLARES BANK 100% SOUND, DEPOSITORS SAFE!!!

"That's the ticket!" Collander sighed, mopping his brow. "My people was pretty sore about that other editorial, the one demandin' judgment on the title cases. This will make 'em happy again."

"It's the straight truth."

"Sure, sure—but say, what you could do with the straight truth if it was on Meehan's side."

He borrowed Ben's desk to scribble telegrams to President O'Malley of the P. D. & R. V. Ben looked at him in distaste.

"Frank, you can finish getting the paper out, can't you?"

"*Si, Senor* Ben."

Ben slipped out and crossed to the Wigfall House. Gilmer and Stainer were alone in the big barroom, sitting at a table with a bottle between them. Gilmer had been drinking heavily.

"Siddown, ol' friend," he said. "I'll get anuzzer glash."

Ben sat down. Gilmer stumbled behind the bar and brought back another glass.

Stainer, who looked almost dead from lack of sleep, covered his glass with his hand. Gilmer filled his and Ben's and proposed a toast.

"Confusion to tyrants, high taxes, abolitionists, smallpox and hoopskirts, as my old daddy used to say. Drink up, drink up, Ben! It's a glorious night, honor for all of us. How 'bout you, Misher Shtainer—ain't you gonna drink?"

Ben saw that the little auditor did not want to drink any more, but was afraid to refuse.

"Don't you think we've all had enough, Clyde?" Ben said, catching Gilmer's wrist.

Gilmer threw him off with a powerful sweep of his arm. His strength made Ben think of a grizzy bear.

"Don' ever try tell ol' Clyde Gilmer he's had enough." He filled all three glasses again. "Glorious night! Showed that filthy breed a thing or two. Whatsh she see in him?"

"Who?"

"Miz Bratton. Laura. Why don't she get on the right side? What do women see in him? Miz Bratton—your sister—women cotton to him. I seen them old grannies in the crowd tonight, noddin' an' whisperin' when Meehan was talkin'."

"Clyde, I do not discuss my family in bars. Mr. Stainer, would you like to spend the night with us? The hotel seems rather bleak."

"Delighted," Stainer said gratefully.

Gilmer stumbled to his feet, made sure of the gun at his hip.

"Good idea. I 'pologize. You're right—shouldn't talk way I do. I'll walk up with you, Ben. Owe your sister a li'l 'pology."

There was no way to get rid of him. He had drunk an immense amount of liquor and he had something on his mind, and he needed company.

The street was black and deserted. They turned off and headed toward Ben's house.

Suddenly something crashed almost in Ben's ear, deafening him. He heard a click, as of a cartridge being ejected, and when he could see again he made out Senator Gilmer reloading an empty chamber in his gun.

"How's that for shootin'?" the senatort said drunkenly. "You boys didn't even see him but I blowed him to smithereens. Like to see Meehan equal that!"

He stooped and pointed to something black and sticky on the sidewalk. The horrified Stainer struck a match to see better. It was a dead bat. Gilmer had

fired at it in midair, and the heavy .45 slug had fairly burst the little creature.

GILMER jammed the gun back in his holster and stumbled on up the street, and Ben and Cecil followed him, slightly sick.

There was no light in the house, but as he opened the door, he heard Betty coming. She appeared in the living room with a candle in her hand. Her face fell as Gilmer went toward her, taking off his big hat. He made a deep, old-fashioned bow.

"Ma'am," he said. "Last time I was here I created a scene. I'm a man of violent temper but one who can feel shame afterward, and I been low-down, shameful sorry ever since. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me, you'll pleasure me mightily."

"Why—"

Taken aback, Betty clutched at her dressing gown. "Senator, I have never had such a gallant or manly speech made to me. I'm truly sorry if I've hurt you and deeply ashamed because of what I said in my anger."

Gilmer took her small hand between his two huge ones.

"You're a fine little lady, Miz Betty," he said. "I'm not worried but what you'll do well as Mrs. Meehan. What plagues me is how well both of you are bound to succeed. That man has an uncommon sharp eye, and a power to him. I can see you years from now, a grand lady in silks and ribbons, in Austin at the Governor's ball, or in Washington or New York. And wherever you go folks'll say, 'There goes Mrs. Meehan—that's Carl Meehan's wife.' I see that in your future, Miss Betty."

"Why, Senator!" Tears sprang to Betty's eyes.

"Sure, I'm drunk! But I got the truth in me. My pa used to say he could look at a man, and say he had the look of success about him, or he didn't have it. And a few years later you'd see he was right. Ma'am, Meehan's got the look of success—the winnin' touch. That's fine for you—but where's it leave me?"

He looked like a tired old man. Ben marveled at the strange, complex character he was.

The whole front door rattled with three loud knocks, making them all jump. Gilmer's hand slid to his gun and he lost the old-man look. He reminded Ben of a grizzly again.

"Let me go to the door, Ben. I don't like that," he whispered.

He crossed the room lightly and, standing to one side, threw the door open. Ben pinched out Betty's candle flame and she huddled against him. Stainer stood flat against the wall as if he wanted to melt through it.

Clip Foshay's dark face loomed in the door. He gave a little grunt of surprise at seeing Gilmer. Gilmer jiggled his gun so Clip would notice it.

"Well, Foshay, you don't look happy to recognize me."

"I ain't ever happy to recognize you, Clyde," Clip said. "They said that auditor feller come up here. He's the one I come to see."

"You want to see Mr. Stainer, do you? Here?"

"No," Clip said. "I want him to come along with me."

He reached for the handle of the screen door. Gilmer's gun came up. Clip hesitated.

"This isn't your lucky night, Clyde," he said gently. "You better put that shootin'-iron up and—watch the lady, Baldy!"

Betty screamed, and that was when Ben first saw Baldy Wolf and Dude Smith. They had evidently entered at the back door. They came out of the dining room with guns leveled.

Ben pushed Betty into the corner. Gilmer wheeled, swearing under his breath, his spurs slashing the varnished floor. Clip smashed his fist through the screen, and his .45 was in it. The gun crashed down on Gilmer's forearm, and Gilmer's gun clanged on the floor.

"Don't try it, Clyde," Clip said calmly, coming into the room. "Take his weapon, Dude. All right, Lovejoy, you and Clyde, you two get back against the wall. Come on, Stainer, you got a little ride ahead of of you."

STAINER tottered forward. Off came Clip's hat. He let Dude and Baldy cover Ben and Gilmer.

"Sorry to do it this way, Mrs. Meehan, but this little man knows where the cute trick is in that bank deal, and we aim to shuffle the deck once more," he said.

Betty stood up and folded her arms. She was shivering. "Is this my husband's idea?"

"I reckon I'll let Carl answer that, ma'am."

"You may tell him," she said, icily, "that no explanation is possible. When a guest in my home—"

"He didn't know he was your guest, ma'am," Clip said patiently, but with growing irritation. "Anyhow I can answer for this much—there's a lot of poor folks dependin' on the right answer to that bank shuffle, and first things come first. If you were my woman, Mrs. Meehan, I'd expect you to ask fewer questions and stand by me. I reckon Carl's got the same right. But then what a man deserves and what he gets in this world is usually two different things."

It was a long speech for Clip, and it silenced Betty; it put her in doubt again. She began crying as Clip, with his gun, motioned for Stainer to follow him.

Ben stepped forward. Instantly all three guns swiveled toward him.

"I'll go along, if you don't mind, Clip," he said.

"If I do?"

"I'll go anyway. The man's a guest. I want to see Carl Meehan. He's not only a bad loser—he hasn't got courage enough to do his own dirty work, to face me or his wife while he does this thing. I've got a name for him and I want to see his face when he tries it for size."

"You feel that way about it, do you?" Clip grinned without mirth. "Then come along, Lovejoy. Maybe it ain't such a bad idee."

He held the door open. Ben walked out slowly, followed by Stainer. They went down the steps to where horses were waiting. Clip remained behind a moment for a last warning to Gilmer. Then he came running after them.

"Dude, lay back and see that old fool don't try nothin'," he shouted. "Up in that saddle, you two. You'll have to ride double. Let's see you move it, now!"

He lashed the startled horses. Ben, in the saddle, found the stirrups just in time. Behind him, Stainer threw his arms around Ben and hung on for dear life. Clip led the way, with the lanky, silent Baldy bringing up the rear.

They passed through a dead, silent town at a hard run. As they crossed the tracks, Dude caught up with them.

"Gilmer went out the back way with a lantern," he reported. "Good thing we turned Lovejoy's horses loose."

"Come on!" Clip snarled. "Even on foot he can turn the town inside out in two minutes."

Dude sucked the knuckles of his right hand. "I doubt that. Not for a lot more than two minutes. I catched him right behind the ear as he come down them steps, I started to say. I never hit a state senator before, Clip. You know, they're just as easy to knock down as ordinary, dirty folks like you and me."

Ben turned in the saddle. "My sister?"

"Your sister's all right," Dude said shortly. "She's Carl Meehan's wife and no harm will come to her. Now shut up."

BEN had thought he was tired when he left the print shop at midnight.

After a while he didn't mind riding. Numbness followed the first soreness, and all he had to do was hang on. Twice he felt Stainer slip off behind him. Each time he was able to stop the horse, some way. Baldy dismounted and silently helped Stainer up again, without comment, without pity, without feeling.

And they rode on.

Morning was making the eastern sky gray when Clip pulled up in front of a small, weatherbeaten shanty, lost somewhere in the vast, rolling Panhandle with only a few seedy cottonwoods to break the monotony. Stainer, though he continued to clutch Ben fiercely, was sound asleep. Ben himself did not know whether he could get down from his

horse without assistance.

But he did. No words were spoken. Clip made a single motion and Ben, rather than admit weakness, forced his aching body to respond.

"You two better grab some sleep," Dude advised, as Baldy led the horses away. 'Ain't nobody goin' to find you here. There are bunks inside. Turn in."

Ben walked stiffly into the stale-smelling, dirty little shanty. He knew enough about the cattle country to know this was a "line-shack," a place where tools could be stored, where men could camp overnight or even for weeks at a time, while working on the fence that stretched from horizon to horizon.

The Circle G brand was burned crudely on the door. He shook his head in admiration as he went inside. They had brought him to Gilmer's own land, to hide him from Gilmer.

Pack rats moved out unwillingly when they tumbled into the unkempt bunks. He heard Clip and Dude and Baldy talking, and their voices gradually died out, and he slept.

* * * * *

"Wake up, Ben."

It was Meehan shaking him—a different Meehan, a dark, grim, angry, somber man. Ben rolled out of bed, stifling his groans with difficulty.

He had slept the day through. Night was falling again. A cool wind blew in his face as he stepped through the door.

"Hello, Mr. Lovejoy."

He stopped. Laura Bratton was leaning against the outside of the shanty. She was dressed in a man's levis, a man's checked shirt, runover boots. She looked like a girl, masquerading as a man. Yet it was a woman's face, a woman's eyes, a woman's frank interest, that she turned on him. The things he had been saving to say to Carl Meehan stuck in his throat.

He managed to say, "Hello, Mrs. Bratton. We've never really been introduced."

Her smile was a sad one. "No. I'm sorry it has to be this way. I've heard so much about you from your sister."

"Oh?"

"Yes." She did not flush at his sarcasm, but continued to look at him steadily. "Your sister thinks you're the greatest man in the world, Mr. Lovejoy. I think your sister is the finest woman I have ever known. It's too bad we—I mean I wish it could—"

Then, slowly, the color came, but she did not turn her head. She was a man's woman, and there was no false modesty about her. She was almost confessing that she had looked forward to meeting him, after all Betty had said about him.

Staring at her, studying her, he began to understand how it was with her and Carl Meehan. With any other man, any other woman, he would have doubted. With these two, he knew, and shame came over him.

IF HE could find one single term to describe Laura Bratton, it would be a Texas one, "straight-shooter." If one quality was uppermost in her, it was her clear-eyed honesty. She was honest and decent. She had scorned Senator Clyde Gilmer for a poor man, because that was her way. She had scorned the senator after the poor man's murder, because that was her way.

Meehan? He was her dead husband's friend. Betty's vision had been clearer; Betty's trusting, unsuspecting nature had seen through to the truth more accurately than his skeptical one. Between Meehan and Mrs. Bratton there was—friendship. The man-to-man friendship, of mutual respect and trust, that minds like Clyde Gilmer's just couldn't understand.

And how terribly lonely it must have been for her! Wherever she went the whispers went ahead of her. Until Betty Lovejoy came to Sunup, no woman had ever asked Laura Bratton to come into her home.

He said, "Mrs. Bratton, I have done you a great injustice. Unlike Senator Gilmer, who apologized to my sister, I find that an apology can't square me. Some day I'll atone."

Suddenly she was struggling with tears. By the astonished look on Meehan's face, Ben knew it was the first

time he had ever seen her cry.

"Laura!"

"Forget it, Carl," she said.

XIV

LAURA BRATTON wiped her eyes with her sleeve and turned away. In a moment she looked back and met Ben's gaze again.

"You get used to it," she said. "To all the insults and indignities, to the vicious whispering, to being alone, to having no friends. What you don't get used to, Mr. Lovejoy, is seeing what loyalty does to a man like Carl Meehan. He has been a friend. He has done what he can to finish what my husband started, and you see how people have twisted it. I don't mind for myself."

"Laura," Meehan said harshly, "There's no need of this. Everywhere I turn, this feller horns in. When I picked a woman to marry, he was her brother. When I filed for Senate, he was on the other side. When I try to fetch out the truth about the bank, he's helpin' hide it. I send for Stainer, and here's Ben Lovejoy again."

"He did what he thought was right," Mrs. Bratton said.

"Thinkin' he's right isn't enough," Meehan said, in the same harsh voice. "A man's got to *be* right now and then."

His eyes met Ben's.

"You went along with your kind, Ben. I got to go along with mine. We haven't reached the bottom of that bank business yet. This ruins me—I reckon you know that. But get this: I'm goin' to have the truth about that bank! If it costs me Betty, I'll have the truth. If it costs me the election, I'll have the truth.

"You horned in here where you weren't wanted. That's all you've ever done, as far as I'm concerned. Well, I held off long as I could, because you're Betty's brother. Now I'm forgettin' who you are, except that you're somebody on the other side. You're a Gilmer man. You got your reasons, no doubt. But I'm not listenin' to any more reasons. The chips are down."

Clip Foshay came around the corner of the building.

"I see Dude comin' on the run, Carl. Sun's in my eyes, but I think he's bein' followed."

Meehan swore.

"Laura, head for home," he said. She shook her head and he swore again but dropped the subject, as though he knew it was useless to argue. "Wake up Stainer. Clip, you boys don't need to get mixed up in this any more."

"You go to blazes," Clip said.

He went into the shanty, grinning, and said, "Hey, little man, stir out of there!" Stainer rolled out of the bunk, groaning.

Meehan went away from the shanty to stare across the rolling slope. Ben followed him. A single rider was coming toward them, hard. Ben could not make out the pursuers Clip had told about, but he saw Meehan shake his head in worried fashion.

"Come back here, Ben," Meehan said.

Ben followed him back into the shanty. There was no sign of Baldy Wolf anywhere. Cecil Stainer, still half asleep, was sitting on the edge of his bunk. At a glance from Meehan, Clip shook the little auditor by the shoulder.

"Wake up. We want somethin' besides figures from you now."

Meehan knelt down and began tracing figures in the dirt floor with his finger. Laura Bratton came in silently and put her back to the wall and leaned there.

"I let the folks down some way last night," Meehan said slowly. "I don't know enough about bankin' to head off smart fellers like you-all. All I know is there's seventy-odd thousand dollars which wasn't there. Now, maybe banks don't ordinarily keep all their money in the vault, but they do *somethin'* with it, and—"

"Mr. Meehan," Ben cut in, "politics is one thing, in which we can honestly differ, but let me make it clear that if there is anything wrong with that bank, I'm on your side.

"Only—I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree here. You've let passion and prejudice lead you up a blind alley."

"No, I ain't," Meehan said stubbornly. "Clyde Gilmer's a crook. He thinks crooked. That little feller Frazer was all right! He was honest. Put two and two together, Ben—the honest man kills himself and the crook lives. What do you make of it?"

SOMETHING stirred uneasily in Ben's mind. Again he could hear Homer Frazer's sarcastic voice, trying to tell him something.

"Perhaps. Perhaps, though, Frazer realized that Gilmer was wrong some way—perhaps he just hated Texas—who knows what's in a man's mind when he kills himself, Mr. Meehan? I don't blame you for distrusting the railroad. Ask Windmill Collander what I think of them! I've never been the blind partisan you've taken me for. But a man's got to weigh both sides and come to a decision on what's good for the country, not for himself."

Meehan stared at him.

"Don't let him talk circles around you, Carl," Clip said. "That's just what you did at the meetin' last night. Ask him where's the danged money!"

"You blind fool," Ben said, "do you think a bank keeps all of its money in cash? For any armed gang to steal any time it feels like it? Has Mrs. Bratton got all her wealth in cash? No! A bank, like Mrs. Bratton, has investments, also!"

Meehan slapped his leg.

"Investments! Now we're gettin' somewheres! I knew a feller who used to call a pair of queens in a poker game an investment. What kind of investments?"

Ben threw up his hands.

"How do I know? First mortgages, bonds—land, perhaps."

Meehan turned to Stainer. His apathy had vanished. He seemed to be closing in now on the thing that had whipped him last night.

"Speak your piece, Stainer. You audited them books. What's old Clyde tied the people's money up in? And I'll tell you why I want to know! Frazer maybe ran that bank up to a certain point, but Clyde laid down the line he had to follow, and any line he laid down was the railroad's line, that he gets from O'Malley and Windmill Collander. Where'd the money go?"

"Great heavens!"

The words burst out of Ben before he could think. He knew what was coming. He stared at Meehan, who had been right all along. Shame flooded through him.

"You're right, Meehan, you're right!" he choked, hearing Homer Frazer's sarcastic voice in his mind saying, "You can buy a good hundred-dollar P. D. & R. V. bond now for eighty-five . . ."

"Shut up!" Clip snarled, and Ben, still choking on his own sense of bewilderment and betrayal and shame, shut up.

"I did not analyze the investment portfolio because that is the job of a securities analyst," Stainer said, as though still speaking from a platform.

"I do, however, remember that approximately seventy thousand dollars was in Frohler County land mortgages, about fifteen or twenty thousand in State of Texas and municipal securities, another thirty thousand in United States bonds, the balance in Pueblo, Dallas and Rio Valley Railway first mortgage gold debenture bonds."

Meehan stared at him, still not understanding, and Ben said sharply, "Carried at par value?"

Stainer shook his head.

"No. Bought at a premium, I believe, on the open market. Carried at about a dollar five to a dollar seven."

So that's why Homer Frazer had killed himself! Ben heard Meehan fire a question at Stainer, and then another, and another. He caught Meehan's sleeve.

"Wait," Ben said. "Let me explain it." If he had encouraged Frazer just a little—if he hadn't showed Frazer he was completely owned by the railroad—Frazer would have told him.

"Taking Cecil's round figures," Ben said, "I would estimate that about a hundred and sixty or seventy thousand dollars is invested in railway bonds. A bond, if you don't know, is a share in a first mortgage on the railroad property."

"I get it, I get it!" Meehan cried.

"I thought you would. These bonds are issued on the value of the railroad as a going concern. Once it stops running, its real estate becomes practically worthless, and a hundred-dollar bond may find itself covered by only ten cents' worth of Panhandle range overnight. The bondholder, unless he will help pump more money into the road to keep it going, stands to lose the difference."

THIS information seemed to electrify Meehan. "Now you're talkin' sense!" Meehan cried. "Then what?"

"These P. D. & R. V. bonds were probably first bought by some New York banking syndicate at about ninety-five cents on the dollar. They, in turn, sell them to other investors—small banks, people with money to invest. If the bonds are good earners, people will pay a dollar or two extra for them.

"Apparently that's what Gilmer's bank did. For its hundred-dollar bonds, it paid a hundred and five to a hundred and seven dollars. The day Homer Frazer killed himself, he told me the bonds had dropped to about eighty-five dollars on the open market—the day the House killed the Gilmer Bill!

"That means the fate of the railroads is tied to the Gilmer Bill. If they don't get another fifteen-million of free money, it's sunk. It stops operating."

"And the Sunup National Bank," Meehan whispered, "gets about seventeen thousand dollars for a hundred and seventy thousand dollars' worth of bonds. And if there's a run on Gilmer's own bank, no other bank is going to take bonds of his railroad and give him cash, are they?"

Ben stood up. "I know how these things work, I'm afraid," he said. "You'll find P. D. & R. V. bonds in banks all over Texas, gentlemen. Every banker stuck with them will be plugging for election of men who will support the Gilmer Bill. Because if the railroad fails, do you know what those banks will do?"

"Pay about twenty cents on the dollar, like Carl said!" Clip snarled. He launched himself at Ben, yelling, "There are some others who'll wish they'd took the easy way out like Frazer did, too. Mrs. Bratton's got money in that bank! Schofield's got money in that bank. Why blast it, they got a hundred and twenty dollars of mine!"

Meehan came between them, throwing the heavier Clip back. He moved like a panther, hurling Clip into the corner.

"Listen!"

Ben turned to watch Laura Bratton as they heard the horse hammer toward them—as, distantly, they heard Dude Smith's faint, warning whoops.

Clip picked himself up out of the corner and headed toward the door, growling, "I'll square it with you some other time, Lovejoy." Meehan followed him outside.

Laura Bratton came over and touched Ben's shoulder.

"I guess we're in for it. Dude wouldn't yell that way unless he had the Circle G on his heels. You two take my horse and Clip's and run for it. I think you've squared yourselves, if anything needed squaring. We've all been wrong, we've all been blind, we've all been fools. You—you'd better go."

He stood up and shook his head. "I guess I'll stay."

The tears glinted swiftly in her eyes. Her hands knotted into fists and came up to her cheeks.

"I know why," she whispered, meeting his eyes, "but please don't, because it's all wrong, all wrong! You don't owe me anything!"

Her voice rose. "Don't stand there!" she screamed. "Don't look at me that way. Get out of here. Do you think Gilmer's men will let you live, now you know the truth about them? Do you think you've got a chance? Why, they'll get you now before they will Carl! They'll fear you more than a thousand armed riders. And I never could face Betty again, if first Carl—and then you—"

She faltered, and Ben said, "I don't know what's come over me, Mrs. Bratton, because I'm not a brave man. Believe me, I've always felt that he who fights and runs away will live to fight

another day. Unfortunately, I don't feel that way today. I think Betty would want me to stick by her husband now."

Gunfire rattled distantly, and he chuckled, laughing at himself because, for some reason, he was not afraid.

"After all," he said, "it's in the family now, isn't it? Us Texas relations got to stick together."

He went out of the door yelling, "Meehan, is there an extra gun around? I'll side in with you."

Behind him came Cecil Stainer, piping, "Make it two guns. Why, this is what I came to Texas for!"

XV

DUDE slid off his horse while it was still running, dug his bootheels into the ground to stop it. Meehan clutched his arm.

"Where's Baldy?"

Dude took time to twist a quick cigarette.

"Dead," he said, succinctly. "Man, that's one upset town! I didn't get within a mile of it, Carl, before we smoked up a posse."

"Posse?"

Dude grinned bleakly. "Call it that. Only Circle G men and a few loafers. Oh, it's strictly a Gilmer posse! Carl, they don't *want* to find Lovejoy! Windmill's puttin' out the paper himself. Makin' a big thing of the 'kidnapin' of the editor, blamin' it on you, makin' hay for the election fast as old Windmill can throw that there type together."

"But what about Baldy?"

Dude's face sobered and he said, "Old Baldy did himself proud! They smoked us up there at the railroad bridge this side of Sunup. All we could do was run for it. There were about six of 'em and, boy-child, they had their orders. They were shootin' to kill!

"They got between us. I tried to get to town, like you said, but they headed me. Old Baldy, he saw I was headed and he just put that big roan horse of his at 'em and fogged straight through.

"He got through, too, Carl! Was racin' for town as fast as that roan could travel. They got him in the back. No, I never got close to him but I know when a man's hit where it counts. They dumped a whale of a lot of lead into him and he rolled out and lit hard and bounced two-three times. I mean they got him!"

It had hit him hard, but he had lived with the memory of his sidekick's death and could talk about it now. He puffed his cigarette, shaking his head a little and staring off in the distance as he remembered how Baldy died.

"Then she don't know yet?" Meehan asked.

"I reckon not."

"Carl," Ben said, using his brother-in-law's name for the first time, as horror swept over him, "did you send Dude and Baldy into town just to let Betty know I was all right?"

Meehan shrugged and nodded. "For you," Dude said, "I wouldn't lift a hand. For the little lady, your sister—it's different."

"That's enough of that," Meehan cried. "Let Ben alone. How many are after you? Six, you said."

"There *was* six," Dude corrected him. "There's five now. I got an idea, Carl. I got a good lead on 'em. I pounded that horse for all he was worth! They'll track me here but they'll think I just dived into this shack to hole up. They won't be expectin' you and Clip."

"Got you! Hide the horses and give 'em a surprise." Meehan turned, but Clip had already started on a run for the woods, where the horses were tied. Meehan turned to Ben and Stainer. "You two get inside and lay down on the floor. You think you want guns but you'll change your mind in about two minutes and a half. You'll just be in the way."

"I won't get in anybody's way," Ben said.

Meehan studied him briefly, scratching his chin.

"Maybe you won't. See where Clip's headed? He can hide the horses down there in that swale, but we can't stand 'em off forever. We got to hit 'em hard and fog out of here.

"You go down there with Clip, Ben. Tell him I said you two were to stay with the horses till we sing out. If you get a chance, get a shot in—let Clip decide that. But don't give yourselves away. Don't give 'em a chance to spot those horses until we sing out to make our break!"

BEN nodded and began running after Clip. Meehan called to him once more, "There's a rifle in a boot on my saddle. Use it. I don't reckon you're much good with a six-gun anyway."

Clip gave him a black look, but he listened, and when Ben was through, he nodded without saying anything. They walked the horses swiftly down into a narrow draw that ran down from the cottonwoods. The little shanty disappeared behind the swell of the hill as they descended.

"Good!" Clip said. "Here's brush to tie to. We won't need to waste hands holdin' em."

They tied the four horses and returned, stooping low. Clip seemed unusually tense and quiet, but he kept on chewing tobacco. When the house was once more in view, he dropped to his knees and crept the rest of the way up the slope that way. They wriggled through the short grass until they were almost back to the shanty.

"Good enough," Clip said, biting off another chew. "Know how to handle a rifle?"

"Some," Ben said.

There was no sign of life around the house. Ben listened, cuddling the rifle to him. It was a short-barreled .30-30 "brush gun," a bolt-action single shot. For the tenth time, Ben made sure there was a bullet in the chamber.

Then he heard hoofbeats, and five men came into view, in a bunch. He recognized all of them. They were among the Circle G bunch who had lined up on the Circle G wall of the schoolhouse. Arny, the foreman, was one of them.

The deep silence held as they circled the shanty, stopping between it and where Ben lay in the grass with Clip. Ben heard Clip give a little wheeze of excitement, and leaned closer.

"Lord, Lord, Lovejoy, they're just plain askin' for it! Maybe luck's swingin' our way at last. We run from these fellers so awful long!"

Arny stood up in the stirrups.

"Dude!"

No answer.

"Dude, in there! You want to come out or do you want us to smoke you out?"

No answer. Arny cocked his head, and Clip chuckled and whispered, "They didn't even look for his horse! Shows you how a man's mind works when he don't use it often. All they can think of is that they got him cornered and got a chance to collect a little blood-money from old Gilmer."

"I know he's in there," Arny said, in a low voice.

He stood up again and shouted, "Dude, you had your chance. I'm countin' three, and then we're smokin'. One—two—"

The other four men had separated from him, riding swiftly around to ring the cabin.

From the window came a puff of smoke. Arny never got to say his three. He stiffened, screamed, clutched at his throat.

Ben sickened to see him plunge off and die, to see the horse drag that crazy, shapeless thing that had been a man, until boot and stirrup separated and the thing came free. But he remembered Baldy Wolf, shot in the back less than a mile from Sunup, on his way to make Betty's mind easier. He remembered other things in a sudden, flashing kaleidoscope—a broken bank and broken promises, humble, honest men used as pawns in a gigantic steal, gossip that burned and seared and scourged and scorched a proud, honest girl!

"Not yet, you fool!" Clip snarled, as Ben's rifle came up.

From the shanty came a rattle of gunfire. The four men yelled, rode in shooting, rode back and collected blankly out of six-gun range. One of them wrung a wounded hand. Otherwise they were unhurt.

"There's more than one of 'em in there!" a man yelled. "Hey—where's Dude's hoss? Look at the tracks yonder! Man, we got the whole danged Etcetera trapped in there. Bill, you skin for home and tell Clyde!"

"Now! They're out of range for me," Clip whispered.

THE man called Bill had spurred his horse aside, ready to head back to bring the whole Circle G crew here. Ben cuddled the rifle stock to his cheek, saw the man's checked shirt fix itself firmly in line with his two sights.

He fired just as Carl Meehan shouted, "Come in, boys!" The man in the checked shirt toppled and Ben jumped to his feet and started running for the shanty.

"Bring the horses, bring the horses!" Meehan was yelling, but Ben called over his shoulder, "Bring them up, Clip. We need an extra one."

He loaded as he ran. He brought the rifle to his hip and snapped a shot at the three men as they charged toward them. It went wild, and still running, he calmly fed in another bullet and took his time firing, and this time a horse went down with a scream and a man flew through the air and hit hard.

They were almost on him now, but they had come within range of the shanty, and Dude and Meehan opened up. The two men shot out of the door like puppets, firing from the hip, a thunderous fusillade that left smoke flying long after the other two men had fled back out of range.

"I killed that man," Ben said, walking toward the huddled figure on the ground. "I killed a man and I'm sick and sorry, but it had to be done—it had to be done."

The man in the checked shirt stirred and looked up at him, and Ben almost cried to see he was not only alive, but could still live. The slug had gone through his right hip, and he would walk with a limp forever, but he might still live.

The man's horse had trotted a little way down the slope and stopped. Ben walked after it, and it waited for him curiously. It was an old horse, gunwise and manwise and well trained. He caught it and swung up in the saddle with the rifle still in his hand, just as Clip emerged with the other horses.

"Changed your mind, boys?" Clip yelled at the two Circle G men. "Go tell Gilmer now."

The two men, safely out of range, conferred briefly. Then they headed at a canter toward the horizon.

Ben rode back to the man he had shot. Laura Bratton came out of the cabin, but he motioned her away. She stood watching as he dressed the man's wounds.

"Not much I can do but stop the bleeding," he advised the victim, "but they'll find you here before long."

The man's wolfish eyes glittered up at him and he made no sound, either of pain or gratitude.

Ben walked the horse to the front of the shanty.

"Caught yourself a horse, did you?" Clip grinned. "Got tired of ridin' double with Stainer, hey? You—"

The big Missourian's hand darted down and his gun roared and Ben felt the breath of its slug on his cheek. He turned incredulously and saw the wounded man. He was on his knees, but he was toppling forward with his left arm across his chest, and a gun was falling out of his right.

Clip, still chewing tobacco, went past Ben and scooped the gun off the ground and tossed it to Ben.

"Here," he said shortly. "Next time you try to play nurse to a Circle G skunk, make sure you pull his teeth."

Killing didn't bother him. He stepped up into the saddle, turned his horse, and waited stolidly for Meehan to lead the way.

"Which way?" Ben said, as they left the cabin behind.

Now he could breathe again. Now he was beginning to feel it—the presence of death, which had seemed so unreal and dreamlike and faraway, while those huddled figures back there were still in sight.

"Let me think," Meehan said. "We'll have the whole county around our ears now." He threw Laura Bratton a hopeless look, worrying about her, wishing they could count on her safety. "I guess you wouldn't go down to Schofield's place?"

"No," she said. "I stick with my outfit, Carl."

He swore.

TO BEN, Meehan appeared bewildered, whipped. He had lost the power of quick decision. His next words betrayed his state of mind.

"We're cornered," he said. "No matter which way they turn, they head us off. We got to have the railroad. We can't drive to market no more! That means we got to have the Gilmer Bill—and Gilmer. We got to bend right down and let him saddle us!"

He ground his teeth in helpless rage.

"I led my people up a blind alley. I got to go around now and tell them to vote for old Clyde, if they don't want the bank busted, the railroad stopped."

He turned his head and pulled his horse aside. Clip and Dude and Laura Bratton rode on. Ben pulled up and waited with him.

"Get the devil out of here, Ben! It takes a minute or two to get used to the idea I got to crawfish."

"Tell me one thing, Carl. Betty's got the idea that Gilmer killed Joe Bratton. I think she must have gotten that from you. How much truth is there in it?"

"I tried not to leave that impression with her, but I reckon women read between the lines. Half the reason Laura married Joe was to get away from Clyde. He bothered her to death, but he kept on bothering her after she got married.

"I was down on my own place when Joe was killed, but near as I can find out, this is what happened: Gilmer was over to Joe and Laura's place that afternoon, and he saw those two foolin' around, dancin' and huggin' like married folks do.

"That evenin' Joe rode over to Sam Tuller's place; Sam's dead and it's part of the Circle G now. Sam and two other fellers were the last to see him alive. Joe headed across Circle G range towards home.

"He was shot in the back, and whoever did it was pretty good with a gun, because it was dark and Joe's frisky hoss wouldn't let a man up close. There were three holes in him and you got to know how to handle a forty-five, to slam three shots into a man before a horse can bolt.

"Ben, that's all I know about it. If Laura—well, if I had Gilmer dead to rights I'd call his hand quick! But the way things are it would only make gossip stick to Laura. She's had enough trouble. While I'm workin' for her, he leaves her alone. That's why I stuck around. I can't call his hand and I don't dare leave her.

"One more thing, Ben. I *am* either a quarter or an eighth Cherokee, I don't know which."

"It doesn't matter, Carl. If you can stand Betty's family, I guess she can stand yours."

Meehan's hand shot out, and they shook silently. Then Meehan's grip relaxed, and his downcast look returned.

"Wish I knew what to do," he said dispiritedly.

"Let's go back to Sunup," Ben said.

"To Sunup? And get killed, or tossed in jail at the very least?"

"They won't lift their hands, Carl, if I ride in with you. Let me ask you a few questions, maybe help clear your mind. Suppose you make a race of it. Suppose I help you, with the paper—tell the truth about the condition of the bank. What happens? Don't you think you could beat him?"

Meehan clenched his fist, and his face showed joy for a moment. Again his shoulders slumped.

"Sure! And bust the bank. And the railroad! And every poor devil that borrowed money to buy railroad land."

"Very likely. But listen a little longer. The bank goes broke. You go to the senate. By then the railroad is in bankruptcy, isn't it?"

"Yes."

BEN spoke slowly, so that Meehan could absorb the point he was trying to make. "And without railroad politics holding them back, the courts will probably throw out all the railroad claims to the scrip lands, won't they?"

"I suppose so."

"There'll be a lot of other banks broken, a lot of other senators and representatives in Austin with the same problem. Couldn't some of you get together, then, and *lend* the railroad fifteen or twenty million of state money, taking new second-mortgage bonds? Throw out the old management—O'Malley and all of Gilmer's friends. Get some new blood in there. Make the Sunup Land outfit hand back the railroad land they've put up for sale.

"Carl, that railroad can be made to pay! It's been bled to death but this country—why gosh almighty, man, a railroad through here can be one of the best investments in the world, sensibly run! Don't quit now! Make those buzzards disgorge! Go ahead and smash the banks. They're counting on you being afraid to do that!"

Sweat dripped from Meehan's forehead as he struggled with himself.

"And I am afraid," he groaned. "I can't bust all those people."

"You won't bust them! When the railroad starts running again their bonds will be good. There will be a little loss, but not as bad as if they lost the railroad. The banks will open again—and how many banks were there here when the first scrippers took this country away from the Kiowas? Don't you think Texans still have spunk?"

As Meehan did not answer, Ben went on hotly, "Ask Ogallala Schofield what to do—don't you think he's got spunk? Ask Tony, in the livery stable—Seth Nennet—old Dorcas Wintergreen—anybody! Do you think they'll sell out to Gilmer that cheap? Or aren't there any poker players left in Texas?"

Meehan mopped his face with his sleeve. He twisted and fidgetted in the saddle. Ben knew what he was thinking. He was tasting victory again, after the bitterness of defeat. He was seeing himself a senator, after having had to hide from the Circle G.

"Let's get back to Sunup, Ben," he said. "We've got work to do."

XVI

WHEN they reached Sunup it was dark. Old Jim Agnew might have been waiting for them to ride down the street. He came out of the shadows and said, "Howdy, Ben. Collander's got me locked out of your shop. They haven't done right by you." He did not seem surprised to see Ben with the Etcetera.

Ben and Meehan exchanged glances.

"Take Mrs. Bratton up to my house and tell my sister I'm back and all right, Jim," Ben said. "Better stick with them. Carl and Clip will be with me. Tell Betty I've got to get a paper out tonight. She'll understand."

Jim nodded. "Come along, Laura," he said. "Come on, now. A woman will just be in the way down here."

She paused indecisively. She rode up beside Ben and laid her hand on his arm.

"I don't know how to be coy," she said. "Take care of yourself, Mr. Lovejoy. I—we—we owe you a lot but we're not out of the woods yet. We—we need you yet."

He patted her hand, nodding, smiling. Yes, they still needed him. They had courage and guns and leadership, but for the job yet to be done it took print. It made him feel good.

"You take care of yourself, too," was all he could say.

With Jim plodding at her horse's head, she vanished up the street. Ben, Meehan, Clip, Dude and Stainer walked their horses down to the print shop.

"I see you got a new editor," Clip said.

Windmill Collander was bent over Ben's desk inside, scribbling away busily. Ben dropped down and handed his reins to Meehan.

"Better put the horses in the livery stable, I suppose," Meehan said. "Then what?"

"Then go to the Wigfall House. Show

yourselves. Strut the street a little. Run a bluff, until I can get a paper out. Let nothing interfere with that, Carl—nothing! Whatever happens, don't let me be interrupted until I get my paper out."

"You won't be," Clip grunted, through the darkness.

They rode up the street toward the stable. Ben tried the front door. It was locked.

"Who—who is it?" came Windmill's quavering voice.

"I'll trouble you to open the door, you fat fool!"

There was silence inside. Ben rattled the door again.

"Now, Mr. Lovejoy, Senator Gilmer put me in charge here," Windmill quavered. "He said not to let nobody in. You better go see him."

Ben drew back two steps and threw himself at the door. It creaked, but did not give. A small shape materialized at his side, and he recognized Frank. The Mexican boy's eyes were bright with excitement.

Together they hit the door, while Windmill screeched, "Now, Mr. Lovejoy, Senator Gilmer has taken over this paper on account of the money you was advanced, and you got to see him. I got my orders!"

They hit the door again, and then Clip Foshay's huge figure came between them, and Clip's bulldog growl came: "I got more heft than you two together. Let me open that there door!"

Clip hit it and the door crashed inward, shaking the whole building. Windmill was slumped against the desk, his pulpy, fat face white and drenched with sweat. His hands were ink-stained and his clothing was rumpled.

A pile of smudged, badly-printed papers stood on the desk. Ignoring the fat man, Ben jerked one off the stack and read:

MEEHAN'S WIFE SAYS WILL REMAIN FRIEND TO BRATTON WOMAN! ! ! !

Despite the long association of her part-Indian bridegroom with the pretty owner of the Etcetera, Mrs. Betty Meehan says she will go on being Mrs. Laura Bratton's friend.

Meehan, the part-Indian candidate for Senator, is still a fugitive from justice as this is written.

We want to ask, what kind of a woman is his wife, to go on taking the part of the husband who kidnaped her brother?

Well, this shows you how far they will go to try to steal an election!

Meehan has not replied to Senator Gilmer's reward offer of $1000 for the recovery of Ben Lovejoy's body.

Why don't the Indian come out and say whether he wants this reward or not? We hear he could use $1000!

The beautiful owner of the Etcetera may be rich, but she is going to find out that in Texas, a good name is valued above pearls.

There was more in this same vein, but Ben did not read any of it. He choked down the flaring madness in him and slowly twisted the smudged paper into a club.

Windmill screamed and stumbled backward across the room as Ben raised the clubbed paper. He made no attempt to defend himself, but only covered his face with his arms and bawled:

"Don't do it, Mr. Lovejoy. You can't hit a sick man! I only did what I was told to do! Please, Mr. Lovejoy!"

WHEN his back was to the wall, Ben brought the paper down. Windmill screamed again, and he kept on screaming until he was on his knees. Things went black for Ben but he kept on striking with the folded paper until he felt Clip Foshay shaking him.

He looked down at his hand. He had beaten the paper to pieces and had only a smudged handfull left.

"Reckon that's enough, Ben," Clip said gently. "That does a man's heart good, but there's work to be done." He stirred Windmill with his toe. Windmill did not respond. Clip pulled his gun and put its cold muzzle against the fat neck and said, "How many of them there papers got out?"

"None," Windmill whimpered. "I swear to heaven none! The press—I couldn't run it and feed it at the same time, and I couldn't get anybody to help me."

"Then you and I are going to burn them, fat feller, while Mr. Lovejoy prints a new one. Stir yourself now!"

Meehan and Dude and Stainer came in while Windmill, weak-kneed from ter-

ror, was carrying the papers out into the alley. Clip, chewing tobacco lazily, leaned in the door and never took his eyes off the fat man.

Meehan took one of the papers from the stack and carried it to Ben. His eyes were blazing. Ben, busy at the typecase, only nodded and chuckled.

"He did it under Gilmer's orders," Ben said. "Notice how Gilmer can't keep his mind off Mrs. Bratton? That tells me all I want to know, Carl. Now get out of my way. Frank!"

As Meehan and Dude went out "to show themselves," the Mexican boy jumped to answer Ben's summons.

"Go across the street and tell Seth I want some supper, some good cigars, a drink of whisky. Tell him to bring it himself, because I want you to hustle out and round up your crew."

Frank vanished at a dead run. Seth came in the front door, hesitantly, just as Clip's huge bonfire started in the alley. Seth had a stubborn look on his face.

"Where's my cigar? My dinner? My drink?" Ben shot at him.

"Why—why, all right, Mr. Lovejoy," Seth stammered. "Fire's still goin' in the range and it won't take Dolores long to cook up some ham and eggs. I—I didn't know you was on our side."

"I'm a newspaperman—I'm not on anybody's side!" Ben shouted. "I'm just for justice—abstract, impersonal justice, pure and holy and never seen before in Texas or any place else on earth, but I need a drink and a cigar and something to eat."

"Why- -why—all right, Mr. Lovejoy."

As Seth went out, Windmill Collander came flying through the print shop. A gun crashed, and the fat man screamed, and Clip Foshay's hoarse voice boomed, "Higher, fat feller! Let's see you kick them heels together a yard up!"

The gun boomed again and Windmill stopped running to dance a shameful Colt's hornpipe, while Ben's fingers flew over the type, while Clip Foshay chewed tobacco and lazily, coolly, cruelly pumped lead into the print shop floor. The room filled with smoke and still Clip kept firing, lazily reloading a shot at a time, until Windmill collapsed, sobbing, against the wall.

"Get!" Clip said, when Windmill had his breath back.

The fat man tottered out, fell, crawled on his hands and knees across the street to the Wigfall House. Seth came back quickly with cigars, whisky, ham and eggs. Ben ate, and with a fat cigar in his mouth began setting type again—coldly, calmly. He did not try to write news. There was no problem of finding words. The words came.

He did not even bother to pull a proof-sheet. When he had written enough to vent the rage in him, he locked up a form, slid it into the press, and began printing his paper. It was printed on one side of one front page only. Frank found his boy helpers somewhere, and only the boys and Seth were there when, shortly after midnight, the first papers came off the press.

SETH took one and went to the big lamp to read it.

"Whew! Hey! Whew! This here is dynamite!"

Ben said, "Pretty good story, isn't it? It'll wake the dead. I wonder if it can wake Sunup?"

Old Seth came over to the press, shaking his head.

"Mr. Lovejoy, I don't think you know what you're doin'. You can't let this paper get out. Clyde won't never let you get away with it."

"No? What can he do?"

"Kill you."

"Then do you think he can win an election?" Ben snapped.

Seth looked puzzled. "N-no. But he'll have to try to kill you, election or no."

"That," said Ben, "is exactly the way I figured it!"

He leaned back and blew cigar smoke and listened to the clacking of the press. Over Seth's shoulder he read what he had written. This time he knew he was right. This time he knew he had won.

Even if he lost everything, he was still winner. . . .

Certainly, in all of Sunup's history, nothing like this had ever been put in printed form. Since Sunup's earliest day, men had "called" each other publicly, saying the words that could not be taken with honor. But never had the words been printed, for all to see. Never had a man been "called" in this fashion.

There was a terrible, roaring finality in those lines of silent black type:

THE SIGNAL SWITCHES TO MEEHAN—HERE'S WHY!

The *Signal* has long been devoted to Senator Clyde Gilmer's candidacy, but with this issue we come out strongly for Carl Meehan, and urge everyone to switch with us.

For one thing, a live senator is more useful than a dead one, and Clyde's life expectancy has been shortened considerably in the past few days.

A man can get away with only so much cowardly slander anywhere. This is especially true in Texas.

There is not a person in Frohler County who has not heard the vicious personal lies told about Carl Meehan.

These lies directly affect a fine woman—indirectly affect another one, since Mr. Meehan married.

The *Signal* herewith announces that Gilmer himself is, and always has been, responsible for the circulation of those lies.

(In other words, Senator, we take this means of calling you a liar, the cheapest kind of a liar, a cowardly liar, a liar who would lie about a woman, a liar who does not even dare to repeat his own lies, but seems to stay awake nights thinking up ways to get other people to repeat them for him.)

Yes, a live senator is always more useful than a dead one, and Gilmer can't get away with it much longer. In fact, he is dead now—a poisonous, rotting, corrupt toadstool who carries with him the stench of carrion.

About three years ago, Joe Bratton was shot in the back. A lot of people have wondered who did it, and why.

The *Signal* herewith accuses Clyde Gilmer of doing it. Clyde was a good shot then, just as he is now.

Clyde Gilmer murdered Joe Bratton in cold blood. And all of you know he did, if you'll just stop to think a little bit. Forget that Clyde is rich, respectable, a state senator.

ANY MAN WHO WOULD LIE ABOUT A WOMAN BEHIND HER BACK WOULDN'T HESITATE TO SHOOT HER HUSBAND IN THE BACK.

You don't need any other proof—but we have it!

The *Signal* has been Gilmer's friend for a long time.

The *Signal* knows that his defeat means the defeat of the Gilmer Bill, and the defeat of the Gilmer Bill means the bankruptcy of the Pueblo, Dallas and Rio Valley Railway, and that means the collapse of the Sunup National Bank and a lot of other banks.

If defeat for Gilmer means ruin—let's face ruin!

However, we think there may still be a chance.

Why not elect Meehan—let him introduce a bill into the Legislature which would LEND THE MONEY TO THE RAILROAD!

Why not have a quick court decision on the scrip cases, and let the scrippers feel safe in their homes once more?

Then, with a loan of State money, and under State supervision, with new officers running it, the P. D. & R. V. can go on serving us—honestly.

Nobody ever thought of this before because Clyde Gilmer and his friends in the P. D. & R. V. didn't want us to think about it.

We think the directors of the railroad also are owners of the Sunup Land and Water Company, and through it have looted the railroad of millions of dollars' worth of land. The money from the sale of this land SHOULD be going to the railroad.

What we are sure of is that Clyde Gilmer isn't fit to be a state senator, because he isn't fit to walk down the street—liar, murderer, thief, betrayer, a poisonous snake whose every breath shrivels every honest heart it blows upon.

And that, friends, is why the *Signal* has switched!

Now, Senator—WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

XVII

AMUSEMENT caused Ben to laugh a little as Seth went out. Seth got halfway across the street with a copy of the *Signal* in his hands, and then came back in something of a hurry to lay the paper on Ben's desk.

"Don't want to be caught reading it in public, do you?" Ben teased him. "You want to have the courage of your convictions, Seth. You're a wealthy man now, a man of property and substance, a leader in the community. If you're afraid, think what effect it will have on us poor people."

Seth flushed, grinned wryly, said, "There's only about three fingers of nerve left in my bottle—not enough to get me gay on this occasion, Mr. Lovejoy. I'll let someone else start the ball."

For a few minutes the old press clanked, while Ben, wreathed in rich cigar smoke, read his paper over and over. "Not exactly good journalism," he declared, "and more in the hellfire Southern stripe than I like, but I think it fills the Texas requirements."

He became aware that the press was no longer running. He turned and saw that Frank was trying to feed it with

one hand and whirl the big flywheel with the other.

"Friends run out on you? Atmosphere getting a little thick for them, Frank?"

"Well, *senor*, these boys don't got no trouble in their families and what's the use they make *Senor* Gilmer mad?" Frank replied. "Me, I'm don't care; I'm never have moch sense anyway."

"How many have you printed?"

"About a honnert."

"That's enough. It will start things. If we can't finish them another way we can always print more. If you don't feel like handing them out, Frank, it's all right. Do it myself."

"Well-l-l—"

"Go on home. I'll take care of things."

Frank sighed with relief and began running as though suddenly released by a spring of some kind. Ben's swivel chair squeaked as he got up. He felt curiously light-hearted. He took the bundle of papers under his arm and went out the front door.

The town seemed to remain in that strange state that is neither awake nor asleep as he made his rounds. Ordinarily people would have been astir long ago, but they knew he was back. The grapevine telegraph had carried word Ben Lovejoy was kicking over the traces and baiting Clyde Gilmer into a shooting-bee, and people were staying from under. He was greeted only by barking dogs, who seemed to resent his ragged, dirty, ill-clad appearance.

He had not realized what a job it was to get the paper around Sunup. He ran out of papers quickly, having distributed a hundred of them without seeing a single soul, in less than an hour. He did not even go into his own part of town, although from a distance of a few hundred rods he could see a figure moving about in his kitchen. Whether it was Stainer or Betty he saw, he could not tell.

As he headed back toward the office he saw riders coming into town, and he knew the grapevine telegraph had been busy farther out, too. The whole Etcetera crew was coming, along with Ogallala Schofield and a broad-shouldered German or two from South Mesa, and several men Ben did not know but whom he recognized by their pinched, ragged look and poor mounts as being small ranchers. They were coming in fast, not galloping, but riding at the hardest gait a horse could hold and still cover the long trail between the Etcetera and South Mesa and Sunup.

Sunrise and the Etcetera reached Sunup at the same time, just as Ben got back to the office of the *Signal*. Carl Meehan was inside reading a paper. He came out with it in his hand and thrust it into Ben's face.

"You reckless fool!" he said.

Ben grinned and tried to shake off the hand. He went inside, saying, "Why?" and Meehan followed him in. After the briefest hesitation, Meehan's eternal shadow, Clip Foshay, came clumping through the door, chewing tobacco with the loud smacking noise that betrayed his upset state of mind.

BEN sat down in the swivel chair and leaned back and said, "Make yourselves at home, gentlemen. This newspaper is always glad to meet its subscribers. Would you care to look at this morning's edition? Help yourselves! I think there are a few left on the delivery bed."

Meehan gave him a black, angry look.

"The Circle G's here," he said.

Meehan pinched his lip, pondering. "Clip, tell the boys to tie next door and kind of wait around there a while."

"Smoke?" Ben smiled, handing Meehan one of Seth's cigars.

Meehan took the cigar and bit off the end and put it in his mouth unlighted.

"I don't need to tell you what a bee's nest you've kicked up."

"No. I understand perfectly."

"I doubt that. Not perfectly."

"Enough to know if the shoe fits, Gilmer's got to put it on."

"That's right, that's right. Ben, you take my breath. Feller like you, with one little old sheet of paper—but you've taken the play as far as you can. I'll handle it from now on."

"You know better than that."

Stubbornly, Meehan's jaw came out, and the mean, grave, secretive Indian look went over his face like a mask. He leaned over with his knuckles on the desk and said, harshly, "Get up to your house or I'll have the boys pack you up there like a kickin', squallin' brat. I don't want no fool shorthorn showoff plays."

"I don't believe you have anything to say about it, Carl," Ben said, quietly. "As we say back East, you're on the outside looking in. You can't butt in on another man's play, no matter what you think of it. You may be a hero to some people but you're just a brother-in-law to me, and the Lovejoys are a pretty bull-headed clan. We're not in an Etcetera cow-camp now. We're in a newspaper office, and you're just standing aside, just one of the subscribers."

"I'll see you fry before—" Meehan began.

Clip twitched his sleeve and said somberly, "Carl, Carl! Cripe's sake, you can't horn in! It's his play. I wouldn't stand for it, either." His big jaw set, and he did not look at Ben. "But I know what we can do—we can see to it that no dad-burned Circle G man horns in either."

Meehan's rage burned out but the Indian look remained. He wavered, while Clip continued to pull at his short sleeve.

"I'll make one more try, Ben," Meehan said, "and then if you want to be a fool, I guess I can't stop you. Nobody expects you to face Clyde down. You're a tarnation Easterner and nobody will think less of you if I stay here and—oh, if that's the way your mind's set!"

"It is," Ben said. He suddenly remembered Jim Agnew. He wanted—badly—a word or two of advice from old Jim, the kind of talk Jim had given him when they were firing at tomato cans.

"All right, Ben, this could be pretty hard on Betty. I hope it won't be. I hope a miracle will happen. But I know it won't. You can push your luck only just so far and then you come up against the facts.

"But if that's the way you want it, that's the way it will be. Answer me this, though: *You* know how it is and *Clip* knows how it is and maybe even Laura does—but how am I goin' to explain it to Betty?"

"Don't try," Ben advised him, getting tense and nervous and quarrelsome inside again. "Just stay out of Gilmer's way and let nature take its course."

"Come on, Carl," Clip said gruffly. "You're talkin' like a bridegroom."

MEEHAN reddened and threw off Clip's grasp. Hesitantly his hand came across the desk, and as Ben took it the Indian look settled deeper, and he said, "Good luck, Ben. I guess you couldn't, after all."

Ben withdrew his hand and said, "No, I couldn't, Carl. Thanks anyway. Do me a favor—keep Betty out of the way and don't let anybody come in that door except Clyde."

Meehan nodded and went out. Clip followed him without a backward glance, and then there was nothing for Ben to do but sit there and smoke and listen to the squeak and creak of his swivel chair every time he moved. The seconds ticked away soundlessly into minutes, and the minutes stretched out endlessly and finally snapped at the end, and then there was only another minute to tick and stretch and break at last.

There was no sign of anyone on the street. The sun crept higher and higher, dispelling the last of the night's chill. He had never seen Sunup's street deserted this long. If a visible plague, a death-dealing cloud, had filled the dusty block, it could not have been avoided more definitely and completely.

The squeaking of his chair scraped on his raw nerves, and he said, to make some other sound, "Wonder if Frank got the axle grease for the press, like I told him." The chair let out a rusty scream as he got up. He crossed the room and looked in the grease bucket. It was empty.

Some of the thick printer's ink would do as well, though. He took a splinter from a basket and daubed the chair's spring and hinge liberally with the black

stuff, and when he sat down again its muffled silence was even more unbearable than its noise had been.

A rat working in the old stone foundation at the rear began gnawing at something with a steady, insistent, grating sound that was like a personal insult. He stamped over to that corner of the room and set his heels down hard.

"Beat it! Shoo!"

The rat was silent a moment and then went on gnawing. Ben wiped his forehead and discovered that his whole face was wet with sweat—that sweat was running down his ribs from his armpits —that the tickle of it between his shoulder blades was like a cold finger.

"Must get a grip on myself. Mustn't let my nerves get the best of me," he scolded himself, going back to his chair. "Why doesn't he come? Oh, blast him, why doesn't he come?"

He heard Dude Smith's voice down the alley. "Get away from that door!" Dude came running but the back door opened and old Berea Hyde hobbled in, sly and dirty and unkempt as usual. He had a copy of the *Signal* in his hand. The broken latch would not hold and Dude jerked the door open and looked in.

"It's all right, Dude," Ben said.

"But Carl told me—"

"I told you it's all right!" Ben yelled at him.

"Well," Dude said, defensively, "you don't need to holler at a person."

He disappeared and old Berea came stumping around the press and the other litter of the room, to lean against Ben's desk. He held the folded *Signal* out in an accusing manner.

"You didn't leave me none at the depot," he said, "but I got one anyway."

"We printed a short run. Your subscription will be extended a week to make up for the oversight," Ben said drily. "What brings you here? Surely not a telegram!"

"Now you look here, Mr. Lovejoy, you don't need to take that tone with me. I'm with you one hundred per cent. A man like me, all stove up and crippled—he's got to think of makin' a livin', he can't risk his job like a whole man can.

"There was a time I wouldn't have spit on Clyde Gilmer, Mr. Lovejoy, but after I got hurt I had to take what job I could get, and hold onto it, and that's why I took his side. I say this—if a man's goin' to work for somebody, let him stick with it all the way, ain't that true? You cain't be on both sides of the fence."

BEN listened in amazement as old Berea went on, "I wrote out my resignation and as soon as the company wire opens, I'm sendin' it in. I don't know how I'll make a livin' but I will somehow."

He thumped the folded paper.

"This here is the showdown that separates the men from the boys. If you got the sand to do this, Mr. Lovejoy, I guess old Berea Hyde's got the sand to come out in the open and say which way he'll vote."

Ben stood up and put out his hand.

"I have done you an injustice, Mr. Hyde," he said. "I seem to have done many people many injustices. Don't send in that resignation. I don't think the P. D. & R. V. will dare make an issue of it, at least for a while. Vote as you please, Berea, and nobody will think any less of you for holding your job."

Berea took Ben's hand and shook it vigorously. "What I come to say is that Clyde's in town. Stopped in at the depot over an hour ago. He wanted a drink so I gave him one out of my bottle. He walked out and I thought he headed this way. Instead he went to the blacksmith shop, and so help me, Dorcas give him another drink!

"I don't know where he went then, but something's wrong. He's tryin' to nerve himself up, it looks like, I don't hardly understand it but if I was you, I'd watch out for trouble. If he was comin' here like a man, all by himself, why ain't he been here? The Circle G boys were scattered all over half the county but they're comin' into town a few at a time.

"Mr. Lovejoy, if they should take it

into their heads to hold a necktie party, there's enough of 'em to do it."

"Thanks, Berea." Ben shook the old cripple's hand again, gratefully. "Go outside and tell that to Dude or any of the Etcetera boys you see. Now get out and stay out. Don't send that wire. Thanks again—but get out and let me alone."

"Know just how you feel, Lovejoy," Berea said, heading for the back door.

Ben heard him talking to Dude, heard Dude say, "You come here and tell that to Clip or Carl!" in an excited tone of voice. The two men went off up the alley.

XVIII

VERY soon Ben heard boots on the plank sidewalk, and he froze to his chair, thinking, "Here it is and I'm not ready, I couldn't get my nerve up in time, I'm not iron-man enough for this business after all." But it was Carl Meehan, walking swiftly past the print-shop. Ben got up and looked out of the window. Meehan walked to the middle of the street and stood there spraddle-legged with his hands on his hips.

"Hey!" he called, raising his right palm outward. "You in there. You want to come out here and talk a minute?"

A circle G rider appeared at the swinging doors of the Wigfall. Simultaneously, Seth Nennet appeared in a front, upper window of his hotel—the same window Roy had been standing in the day Shorty killed him with Dorcas Wintergreen's .22. He was holding the same .30-30 rifle in almost the same position. Ben had the crazy feeling of having been through this whole thing before, and his skin crawled.

However, Seth just stood there, leaning out and peering down. Through Ben's closed doors, the Circle G man's voice could not be heard, but Ben made out Meehan's answer: "You always been a white man. You and me never had any trouble personally. We don't need to have any now. Come out here and talk it over, just you and me."

The rider strode out, jerking his hat on tighter. Slowly, Meehan lowered his right hand. When it was down hip-high he put both hands behind him with the same careful slowness. His fingers linked loosely, as far away from his gun as he could get them. With the same ceremonious slowness, the Circle G man did likewise; it could have been funny except that both men were so slow, so careful, so watchful, so tense.

Whatever they had to say did not take long, and they said it without any movement of their bodies. Old Seth Nennet understood first. He slid the rifle back, away from the ready, and vanished from the window. Meehan nodded, the Circle G man nodded. Meehan's body swiveled without moving his feet, and with his hands still clasped behind him he then turned. His hands unclasped and were hanging loosely at his sides as he walked toward Ben's door. The other man's hands also dropped to his sides and he spun on his heel and walked swiftly into the Wigfall.

Meehan opened the door and peered in, blinking. He said:

"There won't be no necktie party, don't you worry, even if that's what's in Clyde's mind. I don't guarantee the Circle G for much else, but their word is good. Far as the boys are concerned, it's Clyde's personal scrap. Don't let what Berea said get your goat."

"Thanks," Ben said, with dry tongue, dry lips. "What takes him so long? It's —it's not like I thought it would be, Carl."

"It never is. Just remember this—if it's hard on you it's probably harder on him. In a fix like this, I'd always rather be sittin' still, lettin' the other feller come after me."

He closed the door and passed the window once more, disappearing. Then it was a time of waiting once more, a time of listening to the rat in the foundation, of feeling the swelling heat in the little shop as the sun rose.

Ben got out his pocket knife and tried to clean his nails, but his hands were unsteady. He wanted to go over and stamp on the floor over the rat's head again, but he said to himself, "If I do

it's a sign of nerves, and about one more sign and I won't have any."

He sat up straight as he heard Meehan yelling quarrelsomely in the hitch-lot, but then came Jim Agnew's bull voice, and in a minute Jim passed the window.

When he came in the door he was like a stranger, and Ben had an idea what he must have been like down on the Brazos, a lot of years ago. If Meehan and Dude had been cool, old Jim was ice-cold. If they had been steady and sure, Jim had a quick, arrogant way that was almost regal.

HE had got his old notched .45 back, although in a strange holster. The tip of the holster was tied down with a piece of twine that went around his leg, through holes cut in his chaps for this purpose. He smelled slightly of whisky but it had not softened or slackened the ugly, belligerent, hawk-look on his face, nor the leaden, deadly snake-look in his eyes.

"Scared?" he said, and Ben nodded and took the fresh cigar out of his mouth. Jim swore at him, a string of contemptuous names, and out of the corner of his mouth said, "That's the way it always is when you start what you can't finish. There's nothin' about Clyde Gilmer that scares me and there never was. Want me to take this off of your hands?"

"No."

Jim stared at him a moment. He did not soften but he seemed to come to the same conclusion that Meehan had come to a little while back.

"Point it like you was pointin' your finger, Ben," he said, with the same strange hostility. "Don't try to aim and don't try to hurry. Make sure you got it in your hand the way you want it.

"Don't look at his gun. Don't look at anything but his chest and belt buckle, whichever is handiest. Don't pay any attention to anything else. Just pick your spot and make sure you got your weapon in your hand and point it like you would a finger, and keep on blastin' because he ain't goin' to fall with the first one. Don't try to hurry it but keep blastin'. That's the way."

Ben said, "All right, Jim," and Jim said hoarsely:

"You got it straight? Do I have to go through it again?"

With rising irritation Ben said, "Once is enough. Too much, in fact. Let me alone."

Jim flung back the door and stepped out on the street, and Ben thought, as the old gunman passed the window, "He's got a twist in his brain. He likes to kill. And the booze has been his best friend all these years after all, because it counteracts that twist and makes him feel human again."

And once more he sat there, only calmer this time, because he was seeing things Jim Agnew's way, through Jim Agnew's skilled, coldly practical, experienced eye.

Killing a man was a bad business but it was a thing that could be organized ahead of time a little bit, a thing that could be planned scientifically, like a game of quoits or tennis. The odds could be evened by levelness of head.

His head was more steady now, and it occurred to him that perhaps Clyde Gilmer was finding it hard to step out of character as a public figure, a senator, a financier, a leader, and walk down that street with a gun at his hip in the old way. Senator Gilmer, the embodiment of the Texas Code, was after all a rich man.

This time he knew whose boots they were, and his thought snapped off midway and he leaned forward and laid his cigar on the edge of the desk.

He placed it carefully where he could pick it up and smoke it again, and blew away the accumulated smoke between him and the door.

He did not open the desk drawer because he knew the gun was there. He knew how it was placed. He knew what it could do once he got his hand on it.

Suddenly he liked that gun. It was a good gun, one of the best .44's ever made, Gilmer himself had said, when he gave it to Ben.

Gilmer came from the direction of

the blacksmith shop, and he did not pass Ben's window. He came clumping along slowly, knowing, as Ben knew, that his own men and the Etcetera men as well were watching him. Ben wondered what was in his mind, why he hesitated so long before opening the door.

The door came open a crack and Gilmer cleared his throat outside. The door opened wider and he stepped up, a huge, towering, slanting figure, blinking into the darkness-with slack-muscled, flushed stubbornness. Ben gave him a moment for his eyes to get used to the subdued inner light.

When two knights of the West become railroad trouble-shooters they tame all the terrors in Tailholt—including gun hawks, dry-gulchers and dinosaurs!

THE PHANTOM SPUR

A Complete New "Rowdy and Stumpy" Novel

By NORMAN A. FOX

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE — PLUS MANY OTHER EXCITING ACTION YARNS!

Ben said, "Hello, Clyde. You took your time about coming to see me."

GILMER'S head swung around slowly, and Ben saw that he had been drinking. And suddenly Ben wasn't afraid any more—he was only slightly sick. He knew he was right—Gilmer had killed Joe Bratton, shot him from behind in a hopeless fit of insanely jealous rage. His guilt had put lead in his feet and shame in his heart, and he had been a whole hour nerving himself with liquor to come in here.

He had been a dashing Confederate officer, a leader, a brave man. In his younger days, Ben realized suddenly, he must have been a lot like Carl Meehan! But money-lust and the crazier passion for a woman he could not win had warped him, made him a criminal against his own code, and in the last minute had robbed his arm of the steadiness and strength it needed.

"I could forgive you killing Bratton," Ben said, deliberately goading him, deliberately trying to pump nerve and courage back into Gilmer, deliberately whittling down his own chances to purge himself of that sick feeling, "but I never could forgive you for lying about Laura Bratton, Clyde. You know yourself that Texas isn't big enough to hold you now, because your own cowardly delay in coming here is a guilty plea. If I don't execute you they'll string you up higher than Haman.

"Why don't you draw, Clyde? You've got a better than even chance! My gun's in the drawer and you've pulled yours against faster men. You've got a lot to answer for but if you act like a man now, maybe some of it can be forgotten. You took your time coming here—you dragged your feet when you should have come in roaring like a range bull, but you can—ah-h-h!"

Gilmer's leonine head came back and he pivoted on one leg. His hand shot down, starting with his old-time skill and sureness, but he was carrying a burden on his mind that weighed him down like paralyzing quicksand. His hand hit the butt of his gun and knocked it out, but he juggled it a minute, and Ben waited until this moment before opening the drawer.

He did not hurry. He did not look down. His fingers were as sure and steady as they had even been over a type-case. He picked up the .44 and leveled it across the top of the roll-top desk, just as Gilmer went deathly white, just as he got his big hand around his .45 at last.

Ben squeezed the trigger, aiming for the head because the high desk protected Gilmer's huge body. He saw a brown hole come into Gilmer's face where the

eye had been, and he remembered Jim's advice to keep on blasting. He fired once more, missed—heard Gilmer's .45 roar—heard something splinter in the desk.

He stepped around the desk just as Gilmer slumped back against the wall. Gilmer's gun was falling but Ben took a step closer and emptied the .44 into the big man's chest.

He turned his back before Gilmer fell. He went back and put the gun in the drawer, closed the drawer, picked up his cigar. He had to puff hard on it four or five times to bring smoke again.

Carl Meehan and Clip Foshay came running in, and Clip yelled, "Holy cow, I don't know what we'd have told Mrs. Bratton if he got you!" Meehan grabbed Ben by the arm and stuttered, "Are you all right? You all right, Ben? All right?"

"I'm all right, Carl. I'm sick as a dog, is all. Take me home. Let me hang onto your arm."

Meehan shook him off and yelled, "Don't hang onto me. Don't let anybody see you show weakness. Go up to the house."

He began shouting as Ben slumped into his chair. "Get some liquor, Clip. Dude, tell Clyde's boys to come over here and pack him away. Can't any of you do anything but stand around and gawk? Them girls will be down here in a minute."

With liquor in him, Ben could sit in his chair without dizziness or nausea, and in a few minutes he could see clearly enough to read his own newspaper. A little at a time his head cleared.

He was by nature an extremely logical man, and soon the bitter regret at having killed a man disappeared, and he could remember all of the things that made that killing necessary. He could even be a little proud that he had been able to force the issue and make it possible, where Carl Meehan and many others had failed.

When Betty did not come, he told Meehan, "Go find her—tell her what happened. How much do you think she can stand, man?" Meehan went out, leaving Clip alone with him. Clip sat there a moment, chewing rhythmically.

"Feel all right now, Ben?"

"Pretty good."

The Circle G boys had taken away Gilmer's body but he could not bring himself to stand up and look over the top of the desk.

Clip was silent a few moments. Then he said:

"Ben, I want to square somethin' with you. I was pretty rough with you and now I see—well, Ben, we boys got sore about what you said when Roy Nennet was killed and we maybe wasn't fair."

"Neither was I," Ben said.

"That's right. Nobody was fair because there was all heat and no light on this subject, as the feller says." Clip chewed his tobacco thoughtfully. "Want to know what made us maddest?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Bratton took your part. Ben, she never was really in love with Joe—not like she is with you. That's what made us boys sore, to have a nice little lady like Laura Bratton fall in love with a feller like you, a danged shorthorn Easterner that hung around with Clyde Gilmer!

"Try to see how we felt, Ben," he said earnestly, hunching his huge body forward. "You called us boys murderers. Right on top of that, Carl marries your sister, and she fills Mrs. Bratton full of talk about what a noble feller you was, and us boys figured you were lookin' out for a nice, soft place to light, a nice piece of property like the Etcetera."

HE heard Betty scream, "Let go of me, Carl!" and he shot out of his chair and headed for the door, because he did not want her to see where Gilmer had died.

Clip followed him. Meehan and Betty and Laura were all struggling together, and it took a second or two for him to understand that Meehan and Laura were both trying to hold his sister.

He went up and slid his arm around her and she said, "Oh, Ben!" and went white and limp. He picked her up, and Meehan held out his arms.

Ben handed her over but he looked

at Laura and said, "I'd appreciate it if you'll go back to the house and see to her, Mrs. Bratton. I'll be up later, and if you'll wait I'd be honored to offer you lunch."

Her lovely face remained grave. "Thank you, Mr. Lovejoy," she said.

A man couldn't offer marriage to a woman when he had blood on his hands. There must now be a wait, weeks must pass until things sifted down to their permanent shape, but he felt sure she would be there when the wait ended.

"Let's go have that drink, Clip," he said.

In the bar they met Windmill Collander, with his arm in a sling, his fat face pasty. The Circle G boys had vanished. Old Seth himself waited on them. As Ben and Clip drank, Windmill came up and said, "Ben—Mr. Lovejoy I mean—I've got to wire O'Malley. I'd like a word with you."

"Go ahead."

"I know when I'm licked. I read your paper. If we dissolve the Sunup Land and Water Company, sell its assets back to the road for a dollar, say, will your man go along on that loan? I mean if O'Malley steps down and you get your own president, can the railroad count on your man puttin' in a lend bill?"

"You can put it up to him," Ben said.

Windmill licked his lips. "But look, Mr. Lovejoy, Meehan's your man. He'll do what you want, and you know that's the only way the road can keep runnin'. You've been around these deals before. You know I've been for O'Malley; but what about the other stockholders, the other bondholders? They got as much stake in the P. D. & R. V. as you people around here. Can I tell O'Malley you'll try to get Meehan to go along?"

"I'll try," Ben promised.

Windmill sighed hugely. "Thank you, Mr. Lovejoy! I guess things work out for the best. I told O'Malley—but Gilmer had his ear, he wouldn't listen to me—I think we can work this thing out to—"

"Get out!" Ben snarled.

Windmill got out, and Ben, with Clip Foshay stalking at his side, started for home.

Laura would be there—the first time he would see her in his own house.

But not the last. . . .

Horse Thief

The True Story of Sam Blackman's Career

•

ONE of the most active horse thieves in old Missouri was Sam Blackman, who operated between 1852 and 1861, when he was finally caught and hanged. During that interval of almost ten whole years Blackman, by his own eventual admission, stole upward of 240 horses, though he always worked alone.

On one occasion he made off with eleven horses from the Ridling farm outside of Independence. Three months later he revisited the Ridlings and took their remaining six horses.

A squaw man, Blackman hid out with Indian friends when not active. He lived as one of them, wearing their dress and observing their customs so meticulously that only the Indians who knew him recognized him as a white man.

And it was through an Indian that he was finally caught. Blackman made the mistake in 1861 of riding off with two horses belonging to a red brother, Small Feather. Small Feather visited the Indian Agency and related all he knew about Blackman and his most likely hiding places.

A sheriff's posse found him in an Indian village north of Lonejack. Blackman was dressed as an Indian and his face was stained but beneath his Indian costume he wore a revolver.

As the sheriff's party entered the village and one of its members unknowingly looked Blackman over, he was sure he had been recognized. He drew his revolver and began shooting. The lawmen returned fire and Blackman went down with a bullet in his side and another in his thigh. He recovered sufficiently to stand trial in September, and was condemned to die on the gallows as a common horse thief.

—Mark Knight

ROUGH TRAILS for Rusty

They found the shack but the dead man was not there

I

THE little courtroom in Cottonwood City was nearly filled that hot afternoon in midsummer. Old Judge Blakely, frail, white-haired, sat at his desk, looking over a paper. Seated at a table near the bench were "Rusty" Rawlins, "Slim" McCord and "Soda" Sims. Rusty was only sixteen but tall, slender and good-looking, with hair the color of old bronze.

Slim McCord was six feet six inches of slender cowpoke; Soda Sims was short, fat and slightly bald. Soda did the cooking at the SJ ranch.

On one of the front seats was Jim Havens, owner of the K 80, a big hard-

Only Rawlins Knew His Court-Appointed Guardian

faced man, watching the judge anxiously. The rest of the crowd was composed mostly of townspeople. Judge Blakely looked up from his perusal of the paper and spoke quietly.

"Rusty, your mother did not leave a will. In fact, neither did your father. You will naturally inherit everything your mother left at her death, which includes the SJ ranch. But you are not of age, Rusty, you are barely past sixteen; so it becomes my duty to appoint a guardian for you. You understand of course. After due consideration, I shall appoint—"

"Just a moment, Judge!" interrupted Rusty, getting to his feet. "I have heard that you will appoint Jim Havens. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is true, Rusty. Why not? He is your uncle."

"He was my mother's brother, Judge

A Novelet by

W.C. TUTTLE

Was No Uncle—but a Scheming, Ruthless Killer!

—that's all," said Rusty.

"Well, that makes him your uncle."

Rusty's jaw tightened. "That was an accident of fate, Judge. I didn't choose him. I don't believe my mother was ever proud of the relationship—I'm sure I am not."

"Well, bless my soul!" breathed the judge.

Slim got to his feet. "I'd like to put in my two-bits worth, Judge," he said. "Since Rusty's dad was murdered a year ago, Rusty has done growed up. He can ride, rope and brand with the best of 'em and he's got a lot of brains. Yeah, and he can even sling lead, if it comes to a showdown. I don't know of any reason why he'd have to be saddled with a guardian."

"I appreciate your loyalty, Slim," replied the judge, "but this is a necessary procedure. Jim Havens will naturally have Rusty's welfare at heart, and will, I'm sure, work for his best interests. I hereby appoint Jim Havens as Rusty Rawlins' guardian, reporting four times a year to this court. Case dismissed."

RUSTY, Slim and Soda walked out, ignoring Jim Havens, and stopped on the sidewalk. A girl about Rusty's age, who had been at the rear of the court-room, came up to them. Rusty smiled wryly at her, but she did not smile, as she said;

"I think it's a darn shame, Rusty!"

"You know what I think, Joan," he replied. "Anybody but Havens."

"No use blowin' up," sighed Slim. "It's a court order—but all things ain't settled in courts. How's your pa, Joan?"

"Here he comes now, Slim."

Tom Carson, tall raw-boned cattleman, owner of the Circle C, came up to them, patted Rusty on the back.

"What can't be cured must be endured, Rusty. Maybe Jim will be all right—he's a good cowman. Why not give him a trial? After all, he can't be too bad."

"Just how far can he go in this deal, Mr. Carson?"

"Why, I—I really don't know, Rusty. Advice, I suppose and—"

"Orders?" asked Rusty curiously.

"Well, I—yeah, I suppose so."

"And if I refuse to accept his orders? What then?"

Tom Carson shrugged. "That," he replied slowly, "will probably be between you and Jim Havens. Ready to go home, Joan?"

"Yes, Dad. See you later, Rusty."

Rusty, Slim and Soda got on their horses and headed back to the SJ ranchhouse. Jim Havens was at the hitchrack, talking with one of his own cowpokes, but the three men ignored him. The cowboy, Tex Hough, grinned wryly, as the three rode away, and said to Havens:

"Maybe the court gave yuh the right to boss the SJ—but I'm glad it's you, instead of me, Jim. McCord and Sims are as forked as a manzanita, and that kid ain't far behind. They'll be a handful, or I'm mistaken."

"I'll take care of that," growled Havens. "Rusty will obey my orders—or else."

"Like I said," repeated Tex soberly, "I'm glad it's you—not me."

Jim Havens followed them out to the ranch, dismounted at the front porch and came up the steps. Rusty came out, followed by Slim and Soda.

"What can we do for you, *Mister* Havens?" Rusty said.

"Keep your nose out of this, kid," advised Havens coldly. "I'm runnin' things around here now. Slim, you and Soda are fired. Get yore stuff off the place—*pronto.*"

"Well!" blurted Soda. "Of all the funny things that ever came out of a cage—that's the funniest. Keep on, Havens—I love to hear you talk."

Jim Havens flared and his eyes narrowed dangerously, but he managed to hold his temper.

"You get on your horse and pull out, Havens," Rusty said calmly, "you're not running this spread. Slim and Soda stay here."

"Smoke that and see if yuh like the flavor," said Slim.

"Wait a minute!" snapped Havens. "I'm takin' over the SJ."

"You're not taking over anything," denied Rusty. "Perhaps the misguided judge made you my guardian, but he didn't give you the right to run the ranch or fire my men. I don't like you, Havens; I don't like anything about you and judge or no judge, you get off this place, and stay off. That's final."

"We'll find out about that, young man. Any time a young squirt like you—"

"Hold it!" snapped Slim. "This young squirt is a better man than you are, Havens and don't forget it. If you came here to start trouble you shore picked the right spot. And if it's any interest to you we don't care whether yuh choose fists or six guns!"

"Three to one," sneered Havens. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

"Yeah, we shore do," replied Slim. "And we'll *know* yuh are, if you don't pile onto that flea-bitten bronc and get goin'."

Havens went. He climbed on his horse, turned in his saddle and said, "I'll be back—and I won't be alone next time."

"That's good," grinned Slim. "Bring a lot of 'em. If they're all like you bring fifteen, twenty—we don't want the best of it."

Rusty was worried—not over Havens' statement that he would be back, but the possibility that Havens might be in a position to take over the ranch. After supper, Slim went back to town. He didn't tell Rusty where he was going, nor why; but he was back about nine o'clock, grinning widely.

"I got me a to-whom-it-may-concern," he declared proudly.

"You got a what?" asked Rusty curiously.

"Exactly what I said. I went to see Judge Blakely, and I told him what happened out here. He took his pen in hand, and he wrote this here e-pistle. Lemme read it to yuh. It says:

" 'To whom it may concern: If Jim Havens can prove that the SJ ranch is being mismanaged to the detriment of Rusty Rawlins, Jim Havens may then step in and take over the management of said ranch. But the aforesaid mismanagement and detriment must be proved to the satisfaction of this court. Signed Judge Edward Blakely."

"That nails his shirt-tail to the gatepost!" whooped Soda.

"Thanks, Slim," g r i n n e d Rusty. "That's wonderful! Next time he comes, we'll meet him with—"

"With a to-whom-it-may-concern," finished Slim. "Now, if we could only find out who is stealin' SJ calves, we'd be settin' fine."

"Dad never was able to do that," said Rusty. "Slim, I never did believe Dad was killed by a horse."

"Neither did I," said Slim. "The coroner's jury did, that's all. I believe he was killed by somebody—not four-legged neither."

"He found the rustlers," declared Rusty, "and they killed him."

"He wasn't shot," pointed out Soda. "His gun hadn't been fired."

THE boy shook his head. "I know all that, Soda. Suppose he ran into 'em, and they got the drop on him. See what I mean? They hit him over the head. Dad rode bad horses—sure—but no horse killed him, and I'd bet my soul on that."

"Well, anyway, we've spiked Jim Havens," said Slim. "And the judge said that mismanagement and detriment would be awful hard to prove. I saw Lee Marsh, our estimable sheriff, and I told him that Havens had threatened to come back here with reinforcements. Lee said, 'It would be interestin' to see, Slim. If yuh happen to know just when he'll arrive, let me know—I'd like a front seat.' "

"Lee's a swell feller," grinned Soda. "I voted for him."

"I reckon we better hit the hay," suggested Rusty. "I feel a lot better about things, Slim; and thanks for getting that letter from the judge."

The next morning Rusty was working at the house, when he heard loud voices down behind the big stable. He heard Slim laughing, while Soda's voice was raised in protesting argument. He trotted down there and climbed through the fence.

Soda Sims was sitting in the dirt, fanning himself with his hat, while Slim leaned against the stable, laughing as he rolled a cigaret.

"Sody, I told yuh he'd throw yuh," Slim said, "he'd throw anybody who wasn't a top rider. Yuh're gettin' too old to bounce anymore."

"Well, I stayed two jumps," declared Soda painfully. "Gosh, how that there knot-headed equine can twist!"

"And," added Slim maliciously, "when you grabbed for the horn, yuh got a handful of dirt."

"What happened?" asked Rusty curiously. He could see the horse, headed in against the fence, still humped.

"Sody jist rode Geronimo," said Slim. "That is, he got on him. I told him to stop braggin' and git aboard, if he wanted to show how high he could go—so he done it."

"Did you ever ride Geronimo?" asked Rusty, climbing through the fence and joining Slim.

"No, and I don't hanker for it, Rusty. No man ain't never rode that buzzard-head. Shucks, that bronc was seven year old, before we ever dabbed a loop on him. He's poison and chain-lightnin', all in one skin."

"I can ride him," said Rusty flatly.

"You?" gasped Soda. "Rusty, you cain't even git on him, much less stay on him."

"I can ride him," declared Rusty. "I'll show yuh, Soda."

"No, Rusty!" exclaimed Slim. "You lay off that horse! You—listen t' me, you—you ad-o-lescent! Rusty, you stay here. Why, that ornery— Soda, can't you stop him!"

"In my position?" queried Soda. "Blast it all, I cain't even raise m' voice. He'll git killed—and I cain't prevent it."

Rusty walked over to the outlaw, grasped the hackamore and swung the animal away from the fence. A bald-faced roan, chunky, with one glass-eye and a shaggy coat, Geronimo was a perfect piece of bucking machinery. And he hated humanity.

He whirled around, struck his rump against the fence and came around so quickly that he almost knocked Rusty down.

"Catty, eh?" panted Rusty. "Bad horse from Bitter Creek!"

Rusty grasped the cheek-rope of the hackamore and jerked the outlaw's head around, caught his stirrup perfectly and was into the saddle before the roan realized that another foolish human being was on his back. Slim yelled a warning, echoed by the bawling roar of Geronimo. But Rusty was up there, and it was ride or fly.

The roan horse had a bucking routine which had always proved effective. Head down between his knees, he sun-fished very hard for two jumps, and then fairly spun in the air, jack-knifing as he spun, and coming down in the opposite direction. But always before he had contended with men—not with a supple-backed kid, who went with him.

It puzzled the roan. He gave several short, sunfishing jumps and again he swapped ends, only to find the kid still up there, spurring him in the shoulders, while Slim and Soda, backed up against the stable, stared at the tableau. It was too much for Geronimo. He raced at the fence, swung just wide enough to smash Rusty's leg against the poles, but again the kid outsmarted him by pulling his right leg up high just in time. Geronimo made several half-hearted attempts to pitch again, but his heart wasn't in the game and he started galloping aimlessly around in a circle, swinging his head. Rusty pulled him up at the fence and slid out of the saddle, badly shaken but unhurt. The outlaw allowed the kid to lead him away from the fence and take off the saddle.

"If you ever told me anythin' like that, Sody," declared Slim, "I'd say you was lyin'."

"I would be," said Soda soberly. "Absolutely. You know as well as I do that nothin' like that ever happened."

"Shore," agreed Slim. "It was impossible."

Rusty came over to them, carrying the heavy saddle, while Geronimo walked away, his head hanging down, heading for the brush.

"Soda," Rusty said, "maybe you took most of the fight out of him. He wasn't too bad."

SLIM and Soda looked at each other, but made no comments. Slim picked up the saddle and hung it on the fence. Five men were riding swiftly up to the ranch.

Slim said, "Sheriff, deputy and three helpers. I wonder what's wrong now."

The three men with Lee Marsh and Pete Nelson were from Carson's outfit. Marsh, the sheriff, said quickly.

"Slim, you and Sody saddle up—*pronto*. The Cottonwood Bank was stuck up a while ago by a lone man—and he headed out this way. Maybe the five of us, along with you two, can corral him."

Slim and Soda ran for the corral.

Rusty said, "Sheriff, how about me goin' along?"

Lee Marsh laughed shortly and shook his head.

"This is a job for men who can *ride*, kid," he said.

Rusty drew a deep breath and looked over at the brush, where Geronimo had disappeared, but made no further request. He watched the seven men ride swiftly away, and went back to the house. Rusty's greatest prize was his father's old Colt .45—a Bisley Model, scarred from years in a holster, the bone handles worn down from use.

Old Buck Rawlins had taught Rusty to shoot that gun, and Rusty was an apt pupil. Slim and Soda had taken turns, teaching the kid more gun tricks, after Buck Rawlins died.

"The only trouble," complained Soda, "is that the darned kid is gettin' too fast with that old hawg-leg—too fast and too blamed accurate. The way he shoots you'd think he only had one shell left. One nice thing about him is the fact that he's got brains enough to know when to shoot. If he didn't I'd worry."

"Did Rusty ask to go along?" queried Slim, as they galloped away from the ranch.

"Asked so," replied the sheriff. "I told him it was a job for men who could ride."

Soda spurred in close to the sheriff.

"This mornin' Rusty rode Geronimo to a frazzle, Lee," he said.

"He—what?"

"He done it. Ask Slim. If yuh ask me, I'd say that Rusty Rawlins is the best rider in this range—and for money, marbles or chalk he can outshoot you or Pete Nelson."

"And you," declared the sheriff, "can outlie anybody I've ever heard. All right men! We split here. Spread out about a quarter-mile apart, and we'll swing a little north of west. Let's go."

"He don't believe me, Slim," complained Soda.

"Neither do I—and I seen it," replied Slim.

II

RUSTY went back and finished his work at the house, after which he sprawled on the shaded porch and read a book. The posse had been gone about two hours when Rusty saw a man on a gray horse coming slowly down through the brush behind the stable. Rusty could not recognize the horse nor the rider, as they came in behind the corrals, where the willow growth hid them from view. He wasn't afraid—only curious. After a few minutes he saw the man again, on foot this time, working in toward the ranch-house.

Rusty went through the house and came out at the kitchen doorway facing the man who stopped short, his right hand cocked, ready to go for the holstered gun sagging out from his thigh.

He was rather tall, slender, grim-faced, hard-eyed. His left arm hung limply and Rusty could see that he had been hurt. His once-white shirt was caked with blood on the left shoulder and down his left sleeve.

Rusty felt a queer sensation in the pit of his stomach, realizing that any move on his part might cause this man to go into action.

"Come on in, Mister," he said.

The man relaxed slightly, shifted his feet.

"I've been hit, kid. Some men tried to

get me—back in the hills, but I got away. Lost a lot of blood, too. Ain't had a meal for two days, and I couldn't afford to lose much blood."

"Come on in—I'm alone," said Rusty.

The man was as suspicious as a wolf—and as dangerous. Slowly he followed Rusty into the house, tensed, ready for action, his jaw tight under several days growth of black beard. Rusty turned to the stairway, and the man stopped.

"My room—u p s t a i r s is the best place," Rusty said. "Nobody will look for you up there."

"How many of yuh live here, kid?"

"Slim McCord, Soda Sims and me. I own the ranch."

"Oh! Well, I'll take a chance on yuh, kid."

He followed Rusty up to the one room on the second floor, and sat down heavily on the bed.

"We'll get that shirt off first," Rusty said.

"Wait a minute, kid," whispered the man. "If they find me here, you'll get in bad. Maybe yuh can give me some coffee—anythin'—I'm awful hungry. Then I can pull out. I don't want you to get in bad. Don't yuh see—"

"I see," nodded Rusty," but it won't work out, mister. You take it easy, while I get some hot water and some rags—along with food. Maybe I can fix you up—a little, anyway."

"All right, kid. What's yore name?"

"Rusty Rawlins. What's yours?"

"Me?" The man tried to grin, but it was only a grimace. "I'm Mr. Nobody—from Nowhere."

"Suits me," nodded Rusty.

For about an hour Rusty worked over Mr. Nobody from Nowhere. The bullet had cut a clean hole, and had quit bleeding. Rusty had some slight knowledge of things like this, and the grim-faced stranger watched him in appreciation.

A pot of black coffee, huge sandwiches of roast beef and a whole can of peaches went into the interior of the stranger, before he sagged back on the bed and closed his eyes. He had taken the gun from his holster and placed it on the bed beside him.

"The boys will be back pretty quick," Rusty told him, "but they won't come up here. I'll stake your horse out in a good place and give him some oats. Don't you worry about a thing."

The man spoke without opening his eyes.

"A long, long time ago, kid, my mother told me that angels are only found in Heaven. She didn't know you."

"Tell me something," said Rusty. "Did you rob the bank in Cottonwood City today?"

"Rob the bank—today? No, I didn't."

"Good! You ran into the posse—huntin' for him."

"So that was it! No wonder they burned up powder. No, kid, I did not rob the bank; I was just comin' into the country. But if they had nailed me—nothin' on earth could have saved me."

Rusty said, "Go to sleep, Mr. Nobody—everythin' is goin' to be all right. If it breaks wrong it won't be my fault."

It was nearly dark when the posse came back to the ranch, tired out and disgusted.

"Be glad yuh couldn't ride good enough to go along," Slim said. "We ran into the man we wanted just this side of Sleepin' Springs and we shore threw a lot of lead. Seven to one and he gave us the slip. Where he went—nobody knows."

Rusty g r i n n e d slightly. Nobody knows. "Did any of you get hurt?"

"That's the funny part of it," said the sheriff. "He never shot at us once. Either he's out of shells—or somethin'."

"Yuh might as well eat supper here," said Soda. "I'll stir up a mess of nourishment in short order."

The men were all willing. Soda went into the kitchen and started to prepare a meal. He looked things over, a queer expression in his eyes. A huge chunk had been cut from the roast, a whole loaf of bread was gone, a can of peaches was missing from the shelf, the coffeepot was clean—and he knew he hadn't emptied it that morning. Someone had eaten a big meal there.

Soda Sims shook his head. Rusty had not mentioned that anyone had been

there to eat. And there was a decided odor of carbolic-acid in the kitchen. But Soda kept still about it, and went ahead with the meal, while the rest of the men sprawled around the main room, smoking and talking about the escape of the bank robber.

"Yuh know," remarked Slim McCord, "if we didn't know better, I'd say that bank job looks like it might have been pulled by Steve Parnell. He worked alone and he had the nerve to do any kind of a job."

"Yuh think he could have done the job, Slim?" asked the sheriff lazily.

"Not behind the bars of the Colorado State Penitentiary," replied Slim.

"For yore information," said the sheriff, "Steve Parnell ain't behind them bars no more, Slim."

"He ain't? Did they turn him loose, Lee?"

"Two months ago he went over the wall and, as far as I know, hasn't been seen since. I got a wire from the prison, the day after he broke loose, tellin' me to look out for him. As far as that job today is concerned, Slim, you might be right."

"Why would he come back here?" asked Soda.

LEE MARSH shrugged. "The only reason might be that Parnell was sent up from this county three years ago. I wasn't sheriff at that time; so I don't know much about the deal. Wasn't it Havens who cinched the conviction?"

"Yeah," replied Slim. "Havens swore he met Parnell just outside town, when Parnell was makin' his getaway. Yuh know—I'd kinda hate to meet Parnell—if I was Jim Havens."

"Does Havens know that Parnell is loose?" asked one of the boys from the Carson ranch.

Lee Marsh shook his head. "I don't believe I ever told him," he said slowly. "Should have, I suppose. But I don't believe Steve Parnell would come back here—I don't know why he should."

"What sort of a lookin' person is he?" asked Rusty, who had discreetly kept out of the conversation.

"About six feet tall, if I remember rightly," replied Slim. "He wasn't a bad-lookin' hombre—black hair, kinda slender, but plenty hard. I never seen him shoot, but they say he wore a trained gun."

"Yuh better come and get it," advised Soda from the doorway to the kitchen, and the men trooped to the table.

"Is there any reward offered for Parnell?" asked one of the men, as they sat down at the table.

"Five hundred," replied the sheriff.

Slim laughed. "It wouldn't be an easy piece of money—not if Parnell saw you at the same time you saw him."

The men left shortly after supper, and Rusty helped Soda clean up the dishes. Both Slim and Soda slept in the bunkhouse, and they went out there early. Rusty was anxious to see how his patient was getting along, and to take him some supper. On the kitchen table Soda had left a clean plate, some sliced meat, bread and butter, a dish of peaches, and extra coffee in the pot.

Rusty looked it over thoughtfully.

"Soda knows—and what Soda knows, Slim knows."

Under the plate was a large folded square of clean white cloth.

Rusty carried everything upstairs, and found Mr. Nobody sitting up in bed, his gun near his hand. Rusty lighted the lamp and put the food on a chair.

"How is your shoulder?" asked Rusty.

The man grinned. "It's fine, Rusty. By mornin' I can drift. Kid, you're the best doctor I ever had. That and the meal fixed me up swell."

"Good. The posse came back and had supper here."

"I know they did—I heard them talkin', Rusty."

"They don't know you got hit."

Mr. Nobody started eating slowly.

"They can't figure out why you didn't shoot back at them."

"I might have hit a friend. Yuh see, I didn't know what it was all about—and with seven-to-one against me—well, I figured my best bet was to get away from 'em. A bullet glanced off a rock and hit me."

"I staked your horse out back there in the wash, took off the saddle, watered him and gave him plenty oats."

"Rusty, yuh're a wonder. I hope I live long enough to do you a good turn."

"Forget that," said Rusty. "As soon as yuh're finished, we'll put on a fresh bandage."

The man looked keenly at Rusty, as he finished his work, and asked quietly:

"Rusty, why are you doin' this for me?"

"Well," Rusty stood there, holding the basin in his hand, "I don't know just why. You're in trouble—and I—well, I dunno."

"You know who I am."

Rusty nodded. "I reckon your name is Steve Parnell."

"And the law will pay you five hundred dollars for me. That's quite a lot of money, son. You'd have both money and reputation."

Rusty shook his head quickly. "You never hurt me."

"Huh!" Parnell studied that answer for a while. "I never hurt you. I am a fugitive from justice, escaped from the state prison, with a price on my head—but you wouldn't turn me in, because I never hurt you."

"That's right, Mr. Parnell."

Parnell rolled a cigaret. He had to do most of it with one hand, while the boy watched him curiously.

"Rusty, if I had come here, not hurt, and forced you to feed me, how would you feel about it?"

"I might be just a little sore," replied Rusty soberly. "But you've been hurt—and you wasn't guilty of robbin' the bank. And you didn't force me to do anythin' I didn't want to do. We've got along swell, Mr. Parnell."

"Thank yuh, Rusty. That shoulder is almost as good as new."

"It'll heal fast," said the youngster. "No poison in there."

"I reckon the poison is lower than the shoulder, son. Where will you sleep?"

"I've got a bed-roll in the closet. Don't worry about me."

"How old are yuh, Rusty?"

"I'm sixteen, Mr. Parnell."

"Sixteen. I wish I was sixteen again—with yore brains. I'm sure the law wouldn't be on my trail at thirty-six. Will Sims and McCord be away from here in the mornin'?"

"Yes, they usually pull out about eight."

"Good! It'll give me a chance to pull out, too."

"Where will yuh go?" asked Rusty.

Parnell laughed shortly. "Who knows, my friend? Maybe we'll cut each other's trail again—who knows? Maybe not. If we ever do, and you need a gun-hand or a handshake—I'll not forget what you've done for me."

III

NEXT morning Soda Sims noticed that the food was gone, also the piece of white cloth, and there was still an odor of carbolic-acid. Soda silently pantomimed that the stuff was gone, and Slim nodded in agreement. But there was not a hint at breakfast. They talked about Jim Havens, and wondered what his next move would be. After the breakfast was cleared away Slim remarked:

"Me and Sody are goin' to town and see what's the latest news. Then we'll cut back toward Sidewinder Springs and see if we can pick up any calves. Prob'ly won't be back before three, four o'clock. You keep an eye out for Jim Havens—he might come out again. If he does, yuh might show him that to-whom-it-may-concern. I left it on the table."

As soon as they had gone Rusty made a breakfast for Parnell, who was stiff and sore, but able to go on. Rusty found one of his father's shirts, which fitted Parnell, and burned Parnell's shirt in the kitchen stove.

He heard somebody on the front porch and stepped quickly into the main room, where Jim Havens, Red Doyle, Ed Hughes and Tex Hough were coming in. Havens didn't mince any words, as he faced Rusty.

"I'm takin' over the SJ," he said gruffly, "so yuh might as well make up yore mind to it. Slim and Soda can't come back here."

"Wait a minute!" said Rusty angrily. "You can't do that, Havens. Here's a letter from Judge Blakely—read it yourself."

Jim Havens read it aloud, laughed shortly and tossed it aside.

"I can prove anythin' the judge wants," he declared. "And as far as yuh're concerned, you'll do as I say. From now on, I'm runnin' things to suit me."

"You can't do that!" protested Rusty. "You can't fire Slim and Soda. What right would you have to stay here?"

"Possession is nine points of the law," grinned Havens. "We're in possession—and we stay here."

"You had possession for a moment," remarked a cold voice from half-way down the stairs, "but right now you are bein' dispossessed, Havens."

The three men jerked around quickly, facing Steve Parnell as he came slowly down toward them, gun in hand.

"Parnell!" Havens blurted. "Why I—I thought—"

"You think?" queried Parnell. "You never had brains enough to think, Havens. Take their guns, Rusty; they might get foolish. You might drop them at the gate, where they can pick 'em up—if they are able."

Rusty did the job with alacrity and enjoyment and headed for the main gate with the three sixshooters. Parnell relaxed and holstered his gun.

"You can't get away with this, Parnell," Havens said huskily.

"I have," remarked Parnell. "I don't know all the details of this deal, Havens, but it seems that you kinda hanker to take over the SJ. In fact, you want it so much, that you're willin' to do it illegally. Well, I'll tell you somethin', Havens; if you ever try to give that kid a dirty deal, I'll come back here and shoot yore insides plumb through yore backbone. I may do it anyway; but if you want to hurry matters—just give that kid the worst of it."

"Yeah?" sneered Havens. "When the law finds out that Rusty has been harborin' a convict—"

"That's another thing to speak about, Havens. Don't do it. I'll be around a while but you won't know where. If Rusty is taken in for me bein' here I'll know who to blame."

Rusty came back in, a grin on his face.

"All right, you three," Parnell said, "rattle yore hocks out of here and don't come back."

Havens had no reply, as they filed out and got on their horses. At the gate they picked up their guns, but rode away, not looking back.

"I'm sure glad you was here," said Rusty thankfully.

"What's the deal, kid?" asked Parnell.

Rusty told him all about the death of his father and mother, the court appointment of Jim Havens as his guardian, and Havens' determination to move in at the SJ. Parnell nodded thoughtfully.

"Yuh see, I know Mr. Havens pretty well, Rusty," he said.

"I heard last night that Havens was the one whose testimony convicted you, Mr. Parnell."

"That's right it was Rusty—and he knows I remember it. Well, if you'll show me where my horse is staked out, I'll be rollin'."

A few minutes later, with a wave of his right hand, Steve Parnell rode into the brush, and Rusty went back to the house. He had no suspicions that either Slim nor Soda knew that Parnell had been there. He cleaned up the breakfast dishes, removed all evidences from his room, and was sitting on the porch, relaxing, when Joan Carson rode in.

Joan had a mop of blonde hair, blue eyes and freckles. Slim had remarked one day, "Even if her hair is like straw and she's got more freckles than a coyote pup has fleas, she's a right pretty girl."

She was the same age as Rusty and they had known each other all their lives. They sat on the porch.

"Anything new, Rusty?" she asked.

"Not a thing, Joan; how's everythin' at the Circle C?"

"Oh, all right. Dad said that Havens was takin' charge of this place. Havens told him."

"He did, eh?"

"You don't seem excited about it, Rusty?"

"I'm not. Havens was wrong—he is not takin' charge. You see, Judge Blakely gave us a paper, in which it says that Havens will have to prove that we are mismanaging the ranch, before he can take over."

"He fired Slim and Soda, didn't he, Rusty?"

"He tried to," grinned Rusty, "but they're still workin' here. Let's go for a ride. Maybe it's cooler in the hills."

JOAN agreed quickly, and Rusty saddled his horse.

"The sheriff told Dad that you rode Geronimo," the girl said.

"Yeah, I rode him. Shucks, he's no worse than any other horse, seems to me. Joan," Rusty looked at her curiously, "are you goin' to marry me, when we are twenty?"

"I don't think so," she said frankly. "You've been asking me that same question ever since we were twelve."

"And you've always said you didn't think so. You're not sure."

"How could I be sure?" she asked seriously. "Dad says that every year I get crazier and crazier. How can I tell what state my mind will be in five years from now?"

"Yeah, that's right," he admitted. "But I'll be watchin' you."

They rode far back into the hills, where they talked of school and the weekly dances in Cottonwood City; the usual things that teen-age, cow-town-school kids talk about.

Circling buzzards sent them on a search for the reason, and they found a calf, its neck broken from a rope, and only dead a few hours.

"That's rough work," declared Rusty. "Neither Slim nor Soda did that job, Joan; that's rustlers."

"Dad says he don't see how anybody could steal SJ cattle, and dispose of them, Rusty."

"I don't either," admitted Rusty, "but I'd sure like to find out. Of course, it's simple to brand an unmarked calf but that one wasn't over a week old. That's slick-earin', plain and simple."

"But, Rusty, how do you know it's an SJ calf?" asked Joan.

"That's right—I don't; I was guessing."

Rusty got back on his horse and stood high in his stirrups, staring into a washout just beyond them where the buzzards were still hovering. They rode over there and looked down. Piled in the brush was a spotted cow, the SJ brand plainly visible. She had been shot. Rusty shook his head sadly.

"Why did they kill her?" Joan asked.

Rusty shrugged. "Meanness, maybe. Or maybe she fought them, and they killed her. Cows are dangerous—more dangerous than a bull, when you harm their calf. Let's go."

They rode over the top of the divide where a small stream cascaded down into a narrow canyon filled with cottonwoods. They looked down the ravine from their saddles.

"It's awful pretty down there," Rusty said. "I climbed down there once."

"Let's go," said Joan, sliding out of her saddle. "I've been up here before, but never down there."

They tied their horses to a stunted tree and made their way down the ravine to where it widened. There was an old varmint-hunter's shack, clinging precariously to the bank of the washout. They sat down on some rocks across from the shack to rest.

Suddenly, and from quite a distance away, they heard men shouting and several shots were fired.

"What's going on?" Rusty wondered. "Sounded like men herding cattle!"

Then he saw a moving mass of cattle, stampeding over the rim of the canyon, heading straight for them. There must have been several hundred head, bawling, crashing through the brush. Rusty realized that they could not get back to their horses, and that in running down the canyon they would put themselves squarely in the path of the stampeding herd.

Joan's face was white, as she realized their predicament and started to run. Rusty grabbed her tightly. The leaders

were not a hundred yards away now, the ground fairly trembling from the hundreds of pounding hooves, as the herd came down the slope.

"Down — behind the rock!" cried Rusty. "Down, Joan—it may split the herd!"

The strategy was good. The rock, not over three feet high above the ground, split the herd. Dust cascaded over them. They saw one cow hit the rock and turn a complete flip-flop, while others jumped over their heads. It was a terrible experience, but over in a few moments, as the herd swept past. Visibility was nil for several minutes, until the dust settled. The herd was gone, splitting up on the lower reaches of the canyon.

"We didn't have a chance," declared Rusty huskily. "Those men stampeded the herd on purpose, Joan."

"Do you believe someone tried to kill us, Rusty?"

"Just as sure as if they had used a gun."

Slowly they worked their way back to the top where they had left their horses, but the horses were not there. In fact, where they had left their horses was very close to where the stampede had originated. The stunted tree was still there, but there was nothing to indicate that the horses had become frightened and broken away.

Somewhere a horse nickered, and in a few minutes they found their mounts tied to a tree further along the ridge. They climbed thankfully into their saddles.

"Can you see what happened, Joan?" Rusty said. "They shifted the horses so in case we were killed it would look like an accident. Maybe they were moving a herd of cows when they saw us. They knew we didn't have a chance down there if they could send that herd down the canyon."

"But," Joan looked at Rusty, tears making little streaks down her dusty face, "why would anybody want to kill us? That is a terrible thought."

Rusty shook his head. He wasn't very pretty either, with his dust-streaked face. "Let's forget it," he said. "Maybe they just stampeded by themselves."

"But we heard the shooting and yelling, Rusty."

"That's the funny part of it," remarked Rusty soberly. "Cows don't yell, and they don't shoot guns. Let's go home."

SLIM and Soda hadn't returned when Rusty and Joan came back to the ranch-house. Joan went on home. Rusty didn't tell Slim and Soda what happened that afternoon.

At supper Soda said, "Did yore patient get away all right, Rusty?"

"Patient?" Rusty stared at Soda, who grinned widely.

"Yeah, he went away this mornin'," said Rusty.

"Parnell?" asked Slim, and Rusty nodded.

"How bad was he hurt?"

"A bullet-hole in the muscle on top of his shoulder. Bled a lot but I fixed him up. I knew that Soda was wise to it, 'cause he made it easy for me to feed him."

"I hope the son-of-a-gun was grateful," said Slim soberly.

"He was," nodded Rusty, and told them what happened to Havens and his two men. Slim and Soda stared at Rusty in amazement.

"That," declared Slim," sounds like somethin' *you* might have made up, Sody."

"It's true," declared Rusty. "They picked up their guns at the gate, and rode away like good little boys. Now, I'll tell yuh the rest."

"More?" queried Slim. "Shoot, kid, I've got both ears flarin'."

Rusty told them all about finding the dead cow and calf and of the deliberate stampede, which had come near being fatal for him and Joan Carson.

"Rusty, you almost found out somethin'!" Slim exclaimed.

"He almost found out which way they're swingin' the Pearly Gates this season," amended Soda. "Rusty, about how long had that calf been dead? Had *rigger mortis* set in?"

"Who is he?" asked Rusty.

"Was the calf stiff?"

"I don't know, Soda. He still felt soft."

"Ah-hah! They'd just done it! And when they seen you kids go into that narrer canyon, they figured to wipe yuh plumb out and everybody'd think it was a accident. Kid, you've got to watch yore step!"

Shortly after supper that evening, Tom Carson and the sheriff came to the ranch. Joan had told her father what happened to them, and Carson, worried over the incident, wanted to talk with Rusty about it.

"Joan believes it was a deliberate attempt to kill both of you, Rusty."

"It was," replied Rusty. "If we hadn't got behind that rock, we wouldn't have had a chance on earth."

"She told me about a dead cow and calf," said Carson.

"An SJ cow, shot in a washout, Mr. Carson; shot when she probably fought with the men who broke the neck of her calf."

"The sheriff couldn't believe all of this," said Carson.

"I still can't believe that anybody would try to murder Rusty and Joan," said the sheriff." It doesn't make sense."

"Neither does the dead cow and calf," said Slim.

"Rustlers maybe," nodded the sheriff, "but there would be no reason for murder. There had been no brand put on the calf. There was no evidence against anybody."

Slim said, "Lee, you know blamed well cows don't stampede without a reason. They've got to be scared. Rusty and Joan heard men yellin' and shootin'—behind that herd."

The sheriff nodded grimly. "That's right," he agreed. "It's a funny deal."

"And another thing you've overlooked," said Rusty, "is the fact that our horses were moved further up the ridge, before the herd was stampeded."

"That's right!" exclaimed Carson. "Joan told me that, Lee; but I forgot to tell you."

"And that," said the sheriff, "makes it look different."

"You wanted to speak to Rusty about another matter, Lee," prompted Tom Carson.

"Yeah," replied the sheriff quietly. "Rusty, how did it happen that Steve Parnell stuck up Jim Havens and three of his men here in this ranch-house and took away their guns?"

Rusty grinned and shook his head.

"Who knows?" he asked. "Jim Havens and his three men were here. Havens said he came to take over the ranch, and that from now on he'd tell me what to do. I had a letter from Judge Blakely, sayin' that Havens would have to prove that the ranch was bein' mismanaged, before he could take charge. Havens said that the letter didn't mean a thing to him. He said that possession was nine points of the law and he had possession. And just then," Rusty grinned widely, "Mr. Parnell stepped in and dispossessed them."

"It ain't that funny, Rusty," reminded the sheriff. "Parnell is an escaped convict—a dangerous man with a price on his head. Don't you know the penalty for harboring or concealing an outlaw?"

"Concealing?" asked Rusty quickly. "Did Jim Havens tell you that Parnell was concealed here?"

"No, he—well, he said Parnell was here—and you admit it."

"I couldn't deny it, Mr. Marsh. I was as surprised as Jim Havens."

"You was, eh?" queried the sheriff. "It seems that you was very quick in takin' their guns, when Parnell asked yuh to."

"Who wouldn't?" countered Rusty. "If you had been in my place, I'll bet you'd have done what he said."

"All right—we'll pass that part of it. What was Parnell doin' here?"

"Didn't Jim Havens tell yuh?" asked Rusty quickly.

Lee Marsh glared at Rusty, but couldn't think of a question. He turned to Slim and Soda, who looked innocently at him. "Don't ask us, Lee—we ain't never seen Steve Parnell," Slim said.

"For the information of all three of yuh," said the sheriff, "Jim Havens is goin' to Judge Blakely this mornin' and swear that you harbored Steve Parnell here at the SJ. He is goin' to ask the judge to turn the SJ over to him at once."

"Possession is nine points of the law," quoted Rusty quietly.

"You can't fight the law, Rusty," said the sheriff.

"Who can't?" asked Slim quickly. "When law stands for injustice, I'll shore fight her. Jim Havens wants me and Sody off this ranch, so he can do as he wants to with the SJ. All right, Lee—you go and tell Judge Blakely to come out here and let us tell him a few things about right and wrong. We don't dare go in to see him, 'cause we've got to defend the SJ. Will yuh do it, Lee?"

"Yeah, I'll tell him, Slim. Ready to go, Tom?"

"Yes, I reckon I am, Lee. See yuh later, boys."

IV

WHILE Slim and Soda busied themselves around the ranch, Rusty dug into an old trunk, which had belonged to his mother. He looked over a lot of old pictures, ancient magazines, and a lot of collected material. There were many old letters, yellowed with age, tied in bundles; some of them too faded to be legible. One was very yellow from age, undated, but the ink still strong. The letter was to Martha, and the writer was 'Your loving father, Jonas.'

Rusty scowled thoughtfully. His grandmother's name was Martha. This letter must have been written by his great-grandfather. He read a part of it which said:

"In your last letter you mentioned the adoption of a small child named James Cole. As you should realize, Martha, I am utterly opposed to this move. The Cole family are no earthly good, and no good can come to you through this adoption, which I thank the Lord is not a legal court adoption. However, I realize that both you and Emory are headstrong, and that my protests would be of no avail."

"Emory?" whispered Rusty. "Why, that was my grandfather! James Cole? Why, I wonder—there were only two children—my mother and Jim Havens. I remember that! James Cole! Not a legal adoption."

Rusty read the old letter again, tucked it into his pocket and walked outside. Slim and Soda were on the porch.

"You boys watch for Mr. Havens," Rusty said. "I'm goin' in to see the judge."

"What for?" asked Slim. "You can't do any good, Rusty."

"I can tell him our side of the situation," declared Rusty, and walked down to the stable.

"Let him go ahead," said Soda. "Slim, he's growed up awful high in a few days."

"I know he has. We'll set and see what happens."

Rusty had no trouble in seeing the elderly judge, who asked him to sit down. He had known Rusty since his birth. The boy didn't beat around the bush.

"Judge, why did you appoint Havens as my guardian?"

The judge looked curiously at Rusty for several moments.

"Well, I suppose the main reason was because Jim Havens is your uncle, Rusty, and, I believe, your only relative. Why do you ask that?"

Rusty told him of Havens' efforts to fire Slim and Soda and to take over the ranch forcibly.

"I gave Slim McCord a letter—" began the judge.

"I know you did!" interrupted Rusty. "I showed it to Jim Havens, and he said it didn't mean a thing; that possession is nine points of the law."

"Hm-m-m-m-m!" mused the judge. "And how did you get rid of them, Rusty?"

"Steve Parnell stuck 'em up and chased 'em away."

"Steve Parnell? Why, Rusty—you said Steve Parnell?"

Rusty nodded. The judge shifted in his chair and leaned closer to Rusty.

"What on earth was Steve Parnell doing at your ranch?" he asked.

Rusty wasn't going to lie to the judge, so he told him most of the story while the judge looked at him in amazement.

Rusty also told him of the stampeded cattle, and their narrow escape.

"And now," said Rusty, just a little out of breath, "I want to show you a letter, Judge. My mother had only one brother. My grandmother's name was Martha and my granddad's name was Emory. You see how that letter sounds to you."

The old jurist slowly read the letter, placed it on his desk and looked at Rusty over the tops of his glasses.

"If this letter is correct and there was no legal adoption, it would seem that Jim Havens is not your uncle. However, I must go further into this, get more information. In the meantime, young man, don't you realize that you could be jailed and tried in court for harboring a known criminal? Don't you realize that you could be held as an accessory for any crime that Steve Parnell might commit in this country? You do, don't you, Rusty?"

"Why, sure," agreed Rusty.

"Then why did you do it?"

Rusty studied the carpet for a few moments.

"Because I don't believe he's a criminal, Judge."

"You don't—young man, this Steve Parnell is as cold-blooded as a—a fish. He was convicted and sentenced by my court. And you say you don't—wait a moment! Parnell robbed our bank, and the posse wounded him and you—"

"He didn't rob the bank, Judge."

"Oh, he didn't, eh? Can you prove that?"

"Why, yes, I can, Judge. He told me he didn't."

"You—uh—he told you—I see. That is conclusive evidence, absolute proof of his innocence. Do you believe that, Rusty?"

"I do, sir."

Judge Blakely looked at Rusty for a long time, his eyes narrowed in thought. Suddenly he said abruptly:

"Go on home! You are more like your father every day. I'll handle this. Just be glad you are not in jail."

"Thank you, Judge."

"And stay close to home until you quit imagining things."

Rusty went out and closed the door.

The judge stared after him, muttering, "Stampeded cattle, saved the girl! Probably one old cow came down the hill. What an imagination!"

SLIM and Soda were anxiously waiting for Rusty, who told them about his talk with the judge.

"He didn't tell yuh how to keep Havens off this ranch, did he?" Slim asked.

"No," grinned Rusty," but he didn't tell me how we mustn't keep him off, Slim. He's goin' to find out more about Havens. If Havens isn't my uncle, I'll bet the judge will see that he isn't my guardian."

"Anyway," remarked Soda, "it'll be a relief to know that he ain't yore own flesh and blood. Me and Slim are goin' to stick here pretty close until this is settled, and if Havens or any of his men come out here, we'll tie knots in their ears."

It was after nine o'clock that evening. Slim and Soda were playing seven-up, and Rusty was reading a book, when Tom Carson rode in at the ranch. Rusty let him in.

"Somethin' wrong, Tom?" Slim asked.

"There is," replied Carson grimly. "Judge Blakely is dead."

"Dead?" whispered Rusty, "Why, I saw him today. I can't believe it, Mr. Carson!"

"How on earth did that happen?" asked Slim.

Tom Carson sat down and tossed his hat aside.

"I was in the sheriff's office about eight o'clock, talkin' with Lee Marsh, when Jim Havens came in. He said he wanted to go and have a talk with the judge, but wanted Lee to go with him. Lee didn't want to go. Havens contended that you harborin' Parnell out here constituted mismanagement, and he thought Lee should go along, because of the law angle to the thing.

"Lee finally consented to go along. The old lady who is the judge's housekeeper was visitin' somebody tonight. Nobody answered their knock on the

front door, but the lights were on. The kitchen door was open so they went in.

"The judge has a big desk in his bedroom and a lot of books and all that. Well, he was sprawled across his desk, shot through the heart, blood all over everythin'. I saw him—later. But do yuh know what he done? Before he died he dipped blood on his finger, and he wrote on a paper—Par—but died before he could finish it. You could see where his finger trailed the blood down the page—when he died."

Rusty, white-faced, was staring at Carson.

"He tried to write Parnell's name." The rancher said, "Men, we've got to get that killer. Well, I'll be goin' home—I just thought you'd want to know about the old judge. We all liked him. Goodnight."

Carson walked out and closed the door.

"Parnell?" Rusty said. "I don't believe it. Good gosh, I—I doctored him and fed him—for this!"

"Stop it!" snapped Slim. "You didn't do anythin' wrong—that is, it wasn't wrong to either of us. Shucks, we knew he was here, too—and we didn't do anythin' about it."

"I know all that!" Rusty was walking around, his hands clenched. "But I fed him, tended his wound—and now he killed the judge! The judge told me I'd done wrong—that I'd be an accessory to any crime he might commit here."

"Set down!" snapped Slim. "Yuh're crazy, Rusty! You ain't to blame for him killin' the judge. Forget it!"

"What can I do?" asked Rusty, tears in his eyes.

"You say that Parnell never killed him," replied Soda quietly. "The big job now is to find out who. Take it easy, kid."

"Yea-a-ah!" breathed Rusty. "Find the man who did. But how?"

"I wish I was smart enough to tell yuh how," said Slim. "Right now would be a good time to go to bed. Maybe we can think of somethin' tomorrow."

Slim and Soda were up fairly early next morning, but Rusty was gone, leaving nothing to indicate where he had gone. His horse and saddle were not in the stable.

"That beats the bugs a-fightin'!" exclaimed Slim. "He took that thirty-thirty, too; the one over by the fireplace."

"I don't like it," declared Soda. "That kid was plumb upset last night. Why yuh can't tell what he'll do, Slim; we've got to find him!"

"Yeah—find him. Easier said than done. We better have some breakfast and do a little figurin'."

"I jist ain't got the heart to even cook a aig," declared Soda.

"Well, I've got the stummick to eat three, four; so hop to it."

"Sometimes," sighed Soda, "I don't believe yuh're human."

"Not when I'm hongry, I ain't. Git somethin' on the table. Do yuh think I'm goin' to ride on a empty stummick?"

"Folks usually *set* on a horse," complained Soda. "Ride on a empty stummick! Anybody'd think yuh had boils!"

They were eating breakfast when the sheriff and his deputy rode in at the ranch-house. The murder of the judge had affected both of them, and they declined breakfast.

"Where's the kid?" asked Lee Marsh.

"That's what we don't know, Lee," replied Slim. "He's gone—horse and saddle gone."

"And," added Soda," a thirty-thirty Winchester and a beltful of shells. Anyone knowin' the whereabouts of said child, please communicate with the SJ ranch."

"That ain't funny," reminded Slim.

"It's as funny as I can be, under the circumstances."

"Pulled out, eh?" muttered the sheriff. "Why?"

"He was in town yesterday, talkin' with the judge."

"Yeah, he shore was."

"What about?" asked the sheriff.

"Private business, I reckon. Rusty don't advertise."

"Do you suppose that he knows where Steve Parnell is hidin'?"

"Na-a-a-aw! How could he, Lee?"

"He didn't say, Lee. Like we told yuh,

he was gone when we got up."

"Jim Havens is scared stiff," offered Pete Nelson, the deputy.

"What about?" queried Soda.

"About Steve Parnell. Parnell got the judge and Havens was the one who really convicted Parnell. Wouldn't you be scared?"

"Not exactly," replied Soda, removing dishes from the table.

"What do yuh mean—not exactly?"

"I'd be so far away from here by this time that I wouldn't have to be scared."

"You say the kid took a rifle?" asked the sheriff.

"It's gone," replied Slim. "The kid kinda blew up last night, after Tom Carson left."

"If the young fool had only told us that Parnell was here," said the sheriff, "we could have stopped all this trouble."

"Lee," said Slim thoughtfully, "did you ever stop to think that things *have* to happen in a certain way? If the kid was supposed to tell—he'd have told. He wasn't supposed to, that's all. If Judge Blakely wasn't supposed to die last night, he'd still be alive. I don't believe you can stop things that are goin' to happen—it ain't possible."

"I think you're crazy, Slim," declared the sheriff. "Well, we'll drift back, Pete."

As soon as breakfast was cleaned up, Slim and Soda saddled up.

V

BY THE time Slim and Soda were out of bed that morning, Rusty was far back in the hills, just riding rather aimlessly. He had been unable to sleep, because he felt that he was partly responsible for Parnell being at large. The judge had pointed that out to him very forcibly.

Rusty found the dead calf, already attacked by magpies and buzzards. The old cow was still there in the washout, but someone had taken the trouble to skin out the brand. He rode on to the crest of the hill where he and Joan had left their horses and then back-tracked the herd along the hill. It was very plain to see that someone had been moving a herd, saw the chance to send them down the ravine and broke up the herd in a murderous attempt.

Rusty sat there for a long time, watching down the long slopes, but there was nothing in sight except scattered cattle. Buzzards circled all around the hills, and there was quite a concentration below where he and Joan had met the herd. Rusty surmised that some of the cattle didn't survive the long stampede down that treacherous slope.

Rusty swung and rode along just below the skyline. He had no destination. Hunger was beginning to make him wish he had eaten breakfast at the ranch, but he had wanted to make this ride alone. He drew up at the head of a broken canyon. Below him was a sharp slope, heavily brushed, studded with huge boulders left there in prehistoric times by a glacier. He got off his horse and climbed out on a higher point, where he sprawled against a boulder and looked down the breaks.

There was a shack of some kind down there, probably hidden from view at any place except where Rusty was lying. He could see part of the roof and one end of a wall.

Rusty was familiar with all of that terrain, but he had never seen that shack before. Leaving his horse where it was, he began making a cautious stalk down the slope. It was slow traveling in order to avoid making any noise, but Rusty Rawlins was rangewise. No doubt it was an old varmint hunter's shack of which there were any number scattered over that range, but Rusty wasn't taking any chances.

There was no sign of life. Brush grew in against the old walls of the shack. As Rusty came in behind it, close enough to touch the pole wall, he heard a voice. Leaning in against the wall, he could make out the words.

"Don't be a fool all yore life! When that reward is big enough, dead or alive, we collect. Let's go."

"All right, all right—I git kinda spooky over it."

"Forget it."

Rusty heard them mount their horses

and ride away. He drew a deep breath and slid to his hands and knees. He had no idea who they were talking about. When the reward is big enough, dead or alive, we'll collect. It ran through Rusty's mind.

"Parnell!" he whispered to himself. "Parnell! Who else could they mean?"

Rusty was unable to identify the two voices. After waiting for several minutes, he started around toward the front of the shack, one hand braced against the wall in order to avoid the brush.

"Quien es?"

The man was standing not twenty feet from Rusty, a gun in his hand. Rusty shoved hard against the wall, twisting away far enough to use his right hand. The man fired, but the bullet scored the poles, almost at Rusty's shoulder. Rusty had never drawn a gun on a man, never had been shot at before, and his draw seemed to take nim minutes, instead of split seconds. He hardly realized that the gun had bucked hard in his hand, and that the man was falling, twisting on his heels, as he went down. Rusty stared at him in amazement, it seemed so unreal. The man was down all right, and all that Rusty could see was one of his legs sticking up in the brush and weeds.

Rusty felt as though he had been struck in the stomach—an all-gone, helpless feeling. He had shot a man! True, the man had shot at him first, but that seemed inconsequential. He realized that the two men mightn't have gone too far to have heard the shots—and they might come back.

In sort of a panic he shoved away from the cabin and began trying to get back to his horse. He was not cautious and deliberate now, as he clawed his way up the slope. He realized that he still had the gun in his hand, and shoved it back into his holster.

He was so winded that he had to drop to his knees beside his horse and wait a while before mounting. He could not see the shack from there, but he stayed for a while, watching down the slope, trying to determine if those two men had come back. Then he rode along below the rim, watching closely. He stopped again for several minutes, but no one came in sight.

He was about to go on, when something struck his horse a stunning blow, and the animal crumpled under him, rolling Rusty into the brush. As he went down he faintly heard the rattling report of a rifle shot.

Shaken, but not hurt, Rusty scrambled back to his dead horse and pulled the rifle from his saddle-scabbard. Quickly he began working his way along the slope, taking advantage of every rock and bush, keeping well concealed. Once he slipped, grasped a mesquite for support, and a bullet neatly cut a twig off the vibrating top of the small tree.

Finally he reached a piled-up jumble of huge boulders and brush, where he was able to work his way to the top. He rested the barrel of his rifle across a rock and studied the scene below him. Nothing moved. He could determine just about where the shack was located, but could not see it.

He had been there about fifteen minutes when he saw two riders, off to his right, working their way up the slope. In the heat-haze it was difficult to see the color of their horses, but Rusty was sure it was not the two who had bushwhacked him.

A FEW minutes later he saw, far down to the left, two riders. They were too far away for identification, but it seemed to Rusty that one horse was carrying double.

Then he saw who the first two men were—Slim McCord and Soda Sims. Rusty stood up and yelled at them, waving his hat. After a while one of them spotted him and they came on fast.

Rusty came down through the rocks, and the two men stared at him, carrying a rifle, his face scratched, clothes torn.

"What's goin' on, Rusty? We heard shots."

"They killed my horse," said Rusty.

"Lovely dove!" gasped Slim. "They? Who was they?"

Rusty shook his head, levered the car-

tridge out of the chamber of his gun, and shoved it into the loading-gate. Soda and Slim looked curiously at each other.

"Jist like that—they killed my horse," Soda said.

"They did," said Rusty quietly. "There's a shack down there. I went down to it. Two men were there, but they rode away. I went to see what was in there, and a man yelled at me. His bullet almost grazed my right shoulder, when I shoved away from the wall, and then—I killed him."

"You—uh—hu-u-u-uh?" gasped Slim. "You—uh—"

"He killed him jist like that," said Soda, and snapped his fingers. "Oh, it was jist a simple matter. Rusty, you buckwheat, if you don't start tellin'—"

"I told yuh," said Rusty wearily. "You've got ears."

"Yeah, but they've shore been deceivin' me, kid. You killed a man, huh? Where-at is he, and who did he happen to be?"

"He's down by that shack—and I don't know who he is. Yelled at me in Spanish, '*Quien es?*'"

"I see-e-e," said Slim. "Prob'ly wanted to know who was goin' to kill him. Curious, like a cat, huh?"

"You don't believe me," complained Rusty. "I wish it wasn't so."

"All right," said Slim," let's find the shack. I never knowed there was one in that brush, but, as I've allus said, 'I don't know everythin'.'"

"It's a blessin', if yuh ask me," remarked Soda. "Let's go."

They found the shack, after some trouble, but the dead man was not there. However, there was blood on the ground and spattered over the weeds and grass. The shack was empty, but there were plenty of tracks, cigaret-butts and match-sticks on the dirt floor. Slim and Soda looked the place over carefully, and decided that the man was not killed, but taken away by the other two men.

"Judgin' from the blood around here," remarked Soda," that Spanish-speakin' *hombre* will need medical help. Let's go home. Rusty can ride behind me, and you can pack his saddle on yore saddle-horn, Slim. All's well that ends well."

"This isn't ended—yet," declared Rusty. "I've just started."

"Well," remarked Slim, "I'll say you got off to a good start, kid. Next time, take us along—we like to play rough, too."

Rusty ate a big meal—the first one that day—and felt better. It was a relief, in a way, to know that he didn't actually kill that man at the shack, although it was self-defense. Rusty was stretched out on an old sofa, while Slim and Soda played their interminable games of seven-up.

"I've got it!" Rusty blurted suddenly.

The two card players jumped a foot off their chairs, and Slim reached for his gun, before they realized that Rusty merely had an idea. They settled back and looked at him.

"You've got it, huh?" remarked Soda.

"I've got it! Those men had Parnell prisoner!"

"Oh!" grunted Slim quietly. "It just came to yuh, huh?"

"That's right. They're holdin' him for a big reward, dead or alive—and then they'll kill him and collect the money."

"Well, of all things!" exclaimed Slim. "He-e-ey! Sody, you turned that jack when I wasn't lookin'."

"It put me out," said Soda. "I only needed one. Let's listen to the buckwheat's latest information from the front. Go ahead, Rusty—we're all ears."

Rusty told them what he had heard the men say in the shack.

"Could be," agreed Slim. "He-e-ey! If they've got Parnell prisoner, how'd he kill the judge?"

"He didn't—that's the point, Slim. Somebody else did it."

"Why?" asked Soda. "Give me one solitary reason why anybody would murder the judge. It don't make sense to me, Rusty."

"The judge started to write his name in blood," pointed out Slim.

"Maybe somebody else wrote it," said Rusty.

"Yeah mebbe they did," agreed Slim. "Listen! Somebody outside."

It was Tom Carson and the sheriff, coming out to see if Rusty came back home.

"Yeah, he's back, safe and sound, Lee," Slim said.

"Well," said the sheriff, "I was just ridin' out to Carson's place with him, so thought we'd drop in. Anythin' new?"

"Plenty," said Slim soberly. "Want me to tell it, Rusty?"

"Go ahead," replied the boy wearily. "They won't believe it, anyway."

Slim told the story, with minor corrections by Rusty, but did not mention the conversation Rusty heard at the shack.

"That's the darndest thing I ever heard," the sheriff exclaimed. "Rusty, are you sure you hit that man?"

"'Course he did!" interjected Soda. "There was plenty blood."

"And they killed your horse, eh?" said Carson. "You got off very lucky, young man."

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed Rusty. "Sheriff, have they offered any reward for Steve Parnell—outside of the five hundred dollars?"

"Not yet, Rusty. The commissioners meet tomorrow and decide on a reward for Parnell. Probably several thousand dollars."

"Dead or alive?"

"Why, yeah. Why do yuh ask?"

"I'll tell yuh why," replied Rusty. "Parnell is a prisoner of somebody right now—and if that reward is for him, dead or alive, he'll be brought in dead."

Lee Marsh stared at the kid for a long time, before he said:

"Rusty, where did you get that idea?"

"From listenin' to the two men in that shack. They didn't mention Parnell's name—but who else is there a reward for?"

"Yea-a-ah," breathed the sheriff. "It's worth thinkin' about. I'll have a talk with the commissioners tomorrow. If yuh're all wrong, Rusty—we can add the 'dead or alive' later."

"Thank yuh, Mr. Marsh."

"Thank *you*, Rusty; you're the only one who seems to be doin' anythin' around this country."

"And another thing," said Rusty, as the two men got to their feet. "Yesterday I took a letter to the judge, and he wanted to keep it for a while. It's a very old letter, kinda yellow and hard to read. It was signed by a man named Jonas, who was my great-grandfather. If you find it among his things, I'd like to have it back."

"Sure," nodded the sheriff. "I'll have a look for it, Rusty."

That night they barred all the doors and covered the windows before going to bed. Upstairs in his room, Rusty went through the rest of the old letters, and found one that had a distinct bearing on the case. It was from his grandmother to his grandfather, and part of the letter read:

"In a way, Emory, I believe that father was right when he said that the Cole blood is mostly bad. As long as we have taken James to live with us, I suppose we must do our best. I am very sorry to say that the child is not honest. Perhaps I am not strong enough to handle him, and shall look forward to your return. Be assured that I shall do my best while you are absent, but that child would try the patience of Job."

"Grandmother," said Rusty, half-aloud, "I believe I know what you meant."

Rusty put away the old letters, and sat there, toying with a pencil. He drew the SJ brand on an old envelope. Suddenly he looked up at the ceiling, and almost laughed out-loud. It was so ridiculously easy!

VI

RUSTY didn't get up early next morning. Slim and Soda had finished breakfast and were sitting at the table, talking, when he came into the kitchen.

"We figured you was pretty tired so we let yuh sleep," Slim said. "How do yuh feel?"

Rusty was looking wide-eyed at the kitchen doorway, just behind them. Both Slim and Soda turned quickly. Jim Havens and Tex Hough were in the doorway, guns drawn.

"All right, Tex—get Slim's gun," Havens said. "The others ain't got any."

"What's the meanin' of this?" asked Slim angrily. "Have you two turned holdup men?"

"Not exactly," rasped Havens. "We're takin' over the SJ—now. Slim, you and Soda saddle up and hit the grit—yuh're through."

"Is that so?" asked Rusty. "If they go, I go with them."

"You will not—you'll stay right here, or I'll bust your head."

"Jim Havens, you can't get away with a thing like this!" declared Rusty. "The law won't allow it."

"Oh, the law won't, eh? Well, we'll see if the law won't. All right, you two, saddle up and pull out—*pronto.*"

"Don't we get our guns?" asked Soda.

"Yuh do not—not now. I'll leave 'em in town for yuh—later."

There was nothing for Slim and Soda to do but obey. Havens stood there, gun in hand, and saw that both men obeyed his order.

Slim swung into his saddle and said, "See yuh later, Rusty."

"Y'betcha, cowboy," replied Rusty. "This won't last."

Havens cuffed Rusty across the side of his head, knocking him into the corral fence, and almost knocking him out. Slim and Soda rode away, not looking back. Rusty was still dazed, as they went to the house.

"Set down, you nosey young fool!" Havens said.

Rusty was glad to sit down, his head was still spinning. Tex leaned against the fireplace, while Havens stood in the middle of the room, hands on his hips, glaring down at Rusty.

"I'm runnin' this layout," said Havens coldly, "and the sooner you realize that, the better it'll be for you. I always did figure you was too big for your pants. But you're comin' down a peg, kid. I'm goin' to be boss and you'll do as I say."

"The law—" began Rusty wearily.

"What law?" snapped Havens. "Lee Marsh? Don't make me laugh. I'll make Marsh see things my way and if you shoot off yore face—"

Rusty laughed at him, and Havens' face went white with anger.

"Hold it, boss," Tex said. "This ain't the time for that."

"What did you laugh about?" asked Havens huskily.

"I was just thinkin' about somethin' funny," replied Rusty. He wasn't afraid of Havens.

"Somethin' funny, eh? I've got a notion to belt the truth out of you."

"Lay off the kid, Jim," advised Tex. Havens whirled on him.

"Don't you horn into this deal, Tex!" he warned. "I'm runnin' this show."

"See that yuh do—and with a few brains," said Tex.

"He can't, Tex," said Rusty. "He hasn't any."

Jim Havens backed away from Rusty, but looked sharply at Tex, as though afraid of interference.

"Grow up, Jim; he's just a kid," Tex said. "You hurt him and it might be bad for all of us. After all, that dirty temper of yours is a dangerous thing."

"Cole blood," said Rusty.

Jim Havens came back, staring down at Rusty.

"Say that again, blast yuh!"

"You heard it the first time."

"Why, you—"

Tex had stepped over to a front window.

"Hold it—a rider turnin' in here!"

Rusty had got to his feet, staring toward the window. It was Joan Carson, riding up to the front porch. He wanted to yell to her and tell her to get away from there, but he could not make a sound.

She stepped into the doorway and said, "Anybody home?"

No one answered her. She seemed to sense that something was wrong and started to back out. At that moment a running horse, its rider swaying in the saddle, came through the big gate straight for the porch.

"Red Doyle!" Tex gasped. "Somethin' has gone wrong, Jim!"

Red Doyle fairly fell out of his saddle, staggering up to the doorway, his face bloody, features twisted. Joan had

stepped into the doorway, trying to get out, but he thrust her back.

"What happened?" husked Havens.

"Parnell got . . . away! Broke loose, shot Hughes . . . smashed me over the head . . . took Ed's horse. Can't yuh hear me? The horse is hurt. Can't run. He's headin' for town."

"Clumsy fools!" howled Jim Havens. "Two of yuh—and he got away. Yuh say he's headin' for town? They'll hang him!"

"Hang him—y e a h—but not quick enough!" snapped Tex. "You fool, you bragged to him last night! Got too much whiskey and bragged how yuh killed Buck Rawlins, how yuh stuck up the bank twice and lied well enough to send Parnell to the pen! And now he's loose, headin' for the law!"

Joan tried to step past Red Doyle, but Havens grabbed her and flung her aside.

"No, yuh don't, sister!" he said hoarsely. "You stay here!"

It was too much for Rusty Rawlins. He was into Havens before anyone could interfere, and smashed him twice in the face. Taken by surprise, the big man staggered, bumping into Red Doyle, and before he could recover his balance, Rusty hit him twice more.

With a howl of pain and rage Havens caught Rusty around the waist, and flung him the length of the room, where he crashed over a chair and sprawled flat on the floor.

Havens started to follow up his advantage, but Tex blocked him.

"Hold it, Jim!" he snapped. "Whippin' that kid won't solve our troubles. Parnell's loose, headin' for Cottonwood City on a crippled horse. He's goin' to tell everythin' he knows to the law."

"They'll hang him, you fool!"

"Not soon enough! Havens, we either cut Parnell off, or we head for Mexico. Our game is played out, don't yuh realize that?"

"Played out? Head for Mexico? You quitter! Do you think that I've played this game for fun?"

Rusty Rawlins wasn't unconscious, he was thinking fast. Under his hand was a heavy rod, used as a poker for the fireplace. Jim Havens was only six feet away from him, facing Tex Hough.

"Maybe you didn't play it for fun but yuh played it foolish," declared Tex, "and now we're stuck. Yeah, I'm pullin' out!"

HAVENS turned as though to dismiss the subject but whirled back, his six-shooter muzzle almost against Tex's belt. "Nobody runs out on Jim Havens," he gritted. "Mebbe yuh're all through, but not the way you figured. Right here, you—"

At that moment Rusty sat up and flung that heavy bar of iron, squarely against the side of Jim Havens' head. A moment later Jim Havens was a crumpled figure on the floor, not at all interested in the proceedings.

Red Doyle, with little understanding of what was going on, saw Jim Havens go flat on the floor, and took a shot at Rusty. The bullet smashed against the side of the fireplace, a foot above Rusty's head. Then Red Doyle went stumbling backwards, shocked by Tex's bullet, and fell sprawling in the doorway.

Tex whirled to look at Rusty, and a voice drawled from the doorway.

"Drop it, Tex!"

Tex dropped his gun, staring at Steve Parnell in the doorway, who had one foot on each side of Red Doyle. Parnell's face was white, his eyes narrowed.

"Get his gun, Rusty," he said hoarsely.

Rusty got the gun. Joan was backed against the wall, frightened badly.

"Don't be s c a r e d, Joan—he's a friend," Rusty said.

"I like that, Rusty," whispered Parnell. "A friend. Yuh see, Tex, I started for town, but that horse has a bad shoulder; so I figured I better come here, 'cause Rusty might need me. Rusty, they caught me after I left here. Layin' for me, I guess."

"I know. They had you in that shack in the hills, waitin' for the reward—dead or alive."

"Yeah, that's right, pardner—and you scared 'em out of there. They said you and that girl was killed in the stampede, but I didn't believe 'em."

"Smart kid," remarked Tex. "He saved *my* life a minute ago."

"And you stopped Red Doyle," said Rusty. "We're even."

Parnell looked at them curiously. He still had his gun trained on Tex Hough.

"This is the end of the trail, Rusty," he said. "What about Tex Hough?"

The room was silent for a while. Tex said, "I ain't tryin' to save my own skin, boys. I didn't shoot anybody except Red. Havens robbed the bank the other day—alone like he robbed that bank before and put the blame on you, Parnell. That was before my time here. I'm no weepin'-willer—I'll take my medicine."

"Mr. Parnell," said Rusty," would you—would you—yuh would?"

"Yeah, I would, Rusty. Tex, here's yore gun—and the road is open. Yore horse is out there, ready to ramble."

TEX accepted his gun, shoved it deep into his holster and went outside, stepping over Red Doyle. Jim Havens was beginning to move his head and arms. Rusty went over to Joan.

"Tex was square with us, Joan—we don't know where he went."

"I really don't," replied Joan, dazed.

Jim Havens sat up, holding his head in his hands. From outside came the clatter of hoofs, and Rusty ran to the doorway. Here were Slim, Soda, Lee Marsh, Pete Nelson, Tom Carson, coming up on the porch, staring at Red Doyle, at Rusty, standing over him.

"What's goin' on here?" asked the sheriff, shoving Rusty aside and coming in. He stopped short at sight of Steve Parnell, who was smiling at him, looked sharply at Jim Havens.

"It's all over, Mr. Marsh," Rusty said, "except puttin' Jim Havens in jail, charged with the murder of my father, and robbin' the bank twice."

"Lovely dove!" whispered Soda.

"And alterin' the SJ to the K80," added Rusty.

"Robbin' the bank twice?" asked the sheriff. "Yuh mean—Steve Parnell didn't do it?"

"Of course, he didn't. Ask Havens. He murdered Judge Blakely to get that letter I let the judge have—a letter that would prove Jim Havens ain't my uncle. Jim Havens wanted this ranch—even if he had to kill me to inherit it."

"That's right, Marsh," said Parnell. "Havens got drunk at the K Eighty last night and bragged to me what he had done. Yuh see, as soon as that reward was posted, they were goin' to kill me."

"Too bad we waited," said Havens huskily. "I told Tex he was a fool to block us. I should have killed Tex. Ruinin' the whole deal for a few measly reward dollars. Where's Tex?"

No one seemed to know. The sheriff said, "Maybe Tex was smarter than the rest of yuh, Jim—he pulled out."

"There's Red Doyle," said Parnell. "Over at the K Eighty, you'll find Ed Hughes. Three out of four should be enough."

"I'm satisfied," declared the sheriff. "More than satisfied, Steve. Just as soon as I can I'll wire the penitentiary. The law ain't on yore trail any longer."

"Thanks to Rusty Rawlins," said Parnell. "Another thing, Rusty, you didn't kill Ed Hughes at the old shack, but you sure cut a furrow on his head. If you hadn't smelled them out—I'd hate to guess what would have happened."

"Ain't he a ring-tailed wonder?" asked Soda. "Jist ain't he? I know the makin's of a man, when I see one—and he's—where's Rusty?"

Slim grinned and motioned toward the doorway. Slowly they went over there and looked outside. Rusty and Joan were standing on the steps of the porch, looking at each other, and Rusty said:

"All right, darn it, I'm asking it again! Will you marry me, when we're both twenty?"

Joan looked at him soberly.

"Isn't it funny what a person will think of, when—well, when things are dangerous? When Jim Havens threw you across the room a while ago, I thought of you asking me to marry you when we are both twenty, and—well, I thought, 'If this keeps up—I can't.' "

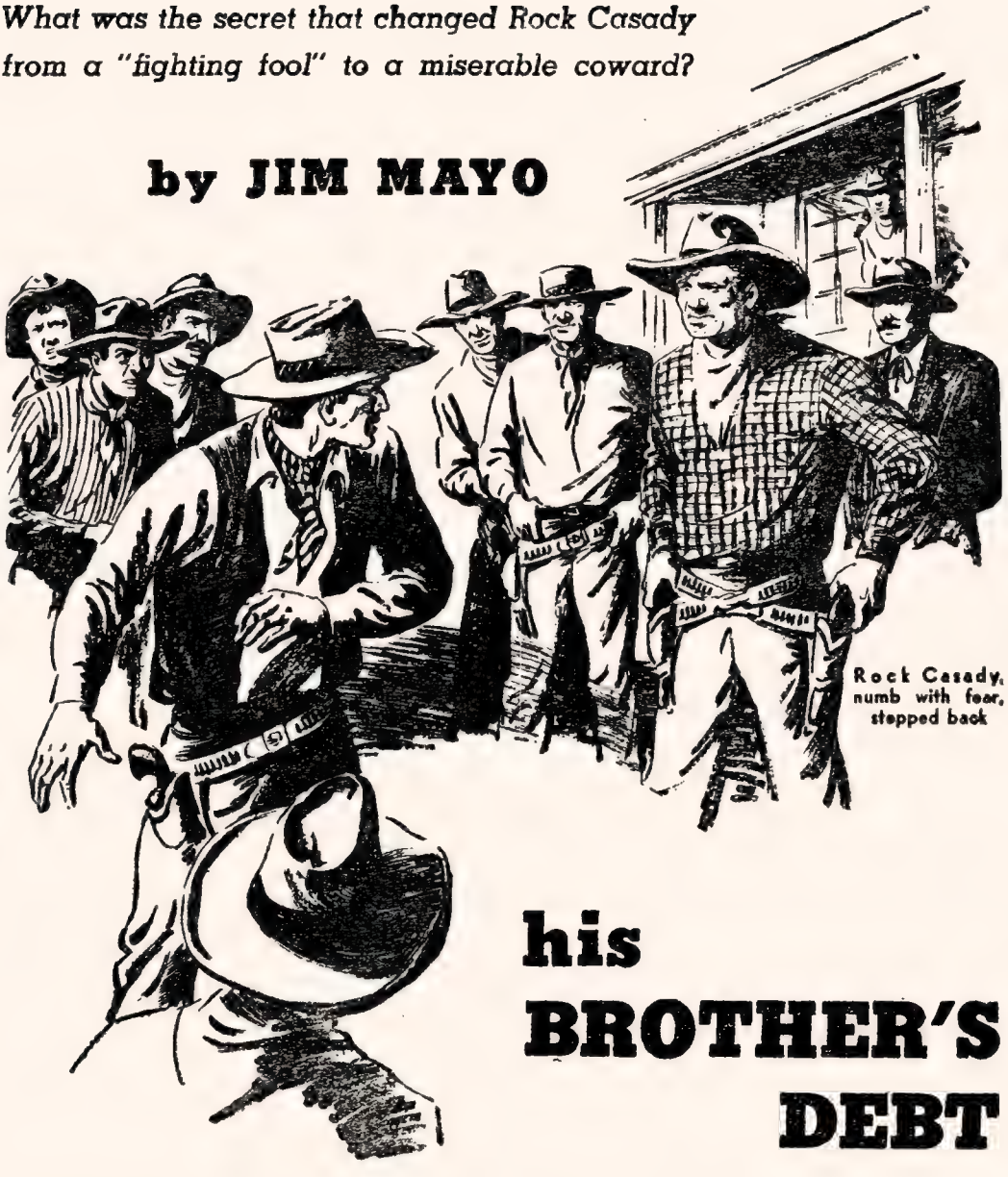
"Yeah, but it didn't keep up, Joan."

"See that it don't," said Joan soberly. "I'd hate to live and die an old maid."

What was the secret that changed Rock Casady from a "fighting fool" to a miserable coward?

his BROTHER'S DEBT

by JIM MAYO



Rock Casady, numb with fear, stepped back

"YOU'RE yellow, Casady!" Ben Kerr shouted. "Yellow as saffron! You ain't got the guts of a coyote! Draw, curse you, fill your hand so I can kill you! You ain't fit to live!" Kerr stepped forward, his big hands spread over his gun butts. "Go ahead, *reach!*"

Rock Casady, numb with fear, stepped slowly back, his face gray. To right and left were the amazed and incredulous faces of his friends, the men he had ridden with on the O Bar, staring unbelieving.

Sweat broke out on his face. He felt his stomach retch and twist within him. Turning suddenly, he plunged blindly through the door and fled.

Behind him, one by one, his shamefaced, unbelieving friends from the O Bar slowly sifted from the crowd. Heads

hanging, they headed homeward. Rock Casady was yellow. The man they had worked with, sweated with, laughed with. The last man they would have suspected. Yellow.

Westward, with the wind in his face and tears burning his eyes, his horse's hoofs beating out a mad tattoo upon the hard trail, fled Rock Casady, alone in the darkness.

Nor did he stop. Avoiding towns and holding to the hills, he rode steadily westward. There were days when he starved, and days when he found game, a quail or two, killed with unerring shots from a six-gun that never seemed to miss. Once he shot a deer. He rode wide of towns and deliberately erased his trail, although he knew no one was following him, or cared where he went.

Four months later, leaner, unshaven and saddle weary, he rode into the yard of the Three Spoke Wheel. Foreman Tom Bell saw him coming and glanced around at his boss, big Frank Stockman.

"Look what's comin'. Looks like he's lived in the hills. On the dodge, maybe."

"Huntin' grub, most likely. He's a strappin' big man, though, an' looks like a hand. Better ask him if he wants a job. With Pete Vorys around, we'll have to be huntin' strangers or we'll be out of help!"

The mirror on the wall of the bunkhouse was neither cracked nor marred, but Rock Casady could almost wish that it was. Bathed and shaved, he looked into tortured eyes of a dark, attractive young man with wavy hair and a strong jaw.

People had told him many times that he was a handsome man, but when he looked into his eyes he knew he looked into the eyes of a coward.

He had a yellow streak.

The first time—well, the first time but one—that he had faced a man with a gun he had backed down cold. He had run like a baby. He had shown the white feather.

Tall, strongly built, skillful with rope or horse, knowing with stock, he was a top hand in any outfit. An outright genius with guns, men had often said they would hate to face him in a shoot-out. He had worked hard and played rough, getting the most out of life until that day in the saloon in El Paso when Ben Kerr, gunman and cattle rustler, gambler and bully, had called him, and he had backed down.

TOM BELL was a knowing and kindly man. Aware that something was riding Casady, he told him his job and left him alone. Stockman watched him top off a bad bronc on the first morning and glanced at Bell.

"If he does everything like he rides, we've got us a hand!"

And Casady did everything as well. A week after he had hired out he was doing as much work as any two men. And the jobs they avoided, the lonely jobs, he accepted eagerly.

"Notice something else?" Stockman asked the ranch owner one morning. "That new hand sure likes the jobs that keep him away from the ranch."

Stockman nodded. "Away from people. It ain't natural, Tom. He ain't been to Three Lakes once since he's been here."

Sue Landon looked up at her uncle. "Maybe he's broke!" she exclaimed. "No cowhand could have fun in town when he's broke!"

Bell shook his head. "It ain't that, Sue. He had money when he first come in here. I saw it. He had anyway two hundred dollars and for a forty-a-month cowpoke, that's a lot of money!"

"Notice something else?" Stockman asked. "He never packs a gun. Only man on the ranch who doesn't. You'd better warn him about Pete Vorys."

"I did," Bell frowned. "I can't figure this hombre, boss. I did warn him, and that was the very day he began askin' for all the bad jobs. Why, he's the only man on the place who'll fetch grub to Cat McLeod without bein' bullied into it!"

"Over in that Rock Canyon country?" Stockman smiled. "That's a rough ride for any man. I don't blame the boys, but you've got to hand it to old Cat. He's killed nine lions and forty-two coyotes in the past ninety days! If he keeps that up we won't have so much stock lost!"

"Two bad he ain't just as good on rustlers. Maybe," Bell grinned, "we ought to turn him loose on Pete Vorys!"

Rock Casady kept his palouse gelding moving steadily. The two pack horses ambled placidly behind, seemingly content to be away from the ranch. The old restlessness was coming

back to Casady, and he had been on the Three Spoke only a few weeks. He knew they liked him, knew that despite his taciturn manner and desire to be alone, the hands liked him as well as did Stockman or Bell.

He did his work and more and he was a hand. He avoided poker games that might lead to trouble and stayed away from town. He was anxiously figuring some way to be absent from the ranch on the following Saturday, for he knew the whole crowd was going to a dance and shindig in Three Lakes.

While he talked little, he heard much. He was aware of impending trouble between the Three Spoke Wheel outfit and the gang of Pete Vorys. The latter, who seemed to ride the country as he pleased, owned a small ranch north of Three Lakes, near town. He had a dozen tough hands and usually spent money freely. All his hands had money, and while no one dared say it, all knew he was rustling.

Yet he was not the ringleader. Behind him there was someone else, someone who had only recently become involved, for recently there had been a change. Larger bunches of cattle were being stolen, and more care was taken to leave no trail. The carelessness of Vorys had given way to more shrewd operation, and Casady overheard enough talk to know that Stockman believed a new brain was directing operations.

He heard much of Pete Vorys. He was a big man, bigger than Rock. He was a killer with at least seven notches on his gun. He was pugnacious and quarrelsome, itching for a fight with gun or fists. He had, only a few weeks before, whipped Sandy Kane, a Three Spoke hand, within an inch of his life. He was bold, domineering, and tough.

The hands on the Three Spoke were good men. They were hard workers, willing to fight, but not one of them was good enough to tackle Vorys with either fists or gun.

Cat McLeod was scraping a hide when Rock rode into his camp in Blue Spring Valley. He got up, wiping his hands on his jeans and grinning.

"Howdy, son! You sure are a sight for sore eyes! It ain't no use quibblin', I sure get my grub on time when you're on that ranch! Hope you stay!"

Rock swung down. He liked the valley and liked Cat.

"Maybe I'll pull out, Cat." He looked around. "I might even come up here to stay. I like it."

McLeod glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes. "Glad to have you, son. This sure ain't no country for a young feller, though. It's a huntin' an' fishin' country, but no women here, an' no likker. Nothin' much to do, all said an' done."

CASADY unsaddled in silence. It was better, though, than a run-in with Vorys, he thought. At least, nobody here knew he was yellow. They liked him and he was one of them, but he was careful.

"Ain't more trouble down below, is there? That Vorys cuttin' up much?" The old man noted the gun Rock was wearing for the trip.

"Some. I hear the boys talkin' about him."

"Never seen him yourself?" Cat asked quizzically. "I been thinkin' ever since you come up here, son. Might be a good thing for this country if you did have trouble with Vorys. You're nigh as big as him, an' you move like a catamount. An' me, I know 'em! Never seen a man lighter on his feet than you."

"Not me." Rock spoke stiffly. "I'm a peace-lovin' man, Cat. I want no trouble with anybody."

McLeod studied the matter as he worked over his hide. For a long time now he had known something was bothering Rock Casady. Perhaps this last remark, that he wanted no trouble with anybody, was the answer?

Cat McLeod was a student of mankind as well as the animals upon whom he practiced his trade. In a lifetime of living along the frontier and in the world's far places, he had learned a lot about men who liked to live alone, and about men who sought the wilderness. If it was true that Rock wanted no trouble, it certainly was not from lack of ability to handle it.

There had been that time when Cat had fallen, stumbling to hands and knees. Right before him, not three feet from his face and much nearer his outstretched hands lay one of the biggest rattlers Cat had ever seen. The snake's head jerked back above its coil, and then, with a gun's roar blasting in his ears, that head was gone and the snake was a writhing mass of coils, showing

only a bloody stump where the head had been!

Cat had gotten to his feet gray faced and turned. Rock Casady was thumbing a shell into his gun. The young man grinned.

"That was a close one!" he had said cheerfully.

McLeod had dusted off his hands, staring at Casady. "I've heard of men drawin' faster'n a snake could strike, but that's the first time I ever seen it!"

Since then he had seen that .44 shoot the heads off quail and he had seen a quick hip shot with the rifle break a deer's neck.

Now his mind reverted to their former topic. "If that Vorys is tied in with some smart hombre, there'll be hell to pay! Pete was never no great shakes for brains, but he's tough, tough as all get out! With somebody to think for him, he'll make this country unfit to live in!"

Later that night, McLeod looked over his shoulder from the fire. "You know," he said, "if I was wantin' a spread of my own, an' didn't care much for folks, like you, I'd go down into the Pleasant Valley Outlet, south of here. Lonely, but she's sure grand country!"

Two days later Rock was mending a bridle when Sue Landon walked over to him. She wore jeans and boy's shirt, and her eyes were bright and lovely.

"Hi!" she said brightly. "You're the new hand? You certainly keep out of the way. All this time on the ranch and I never met you before!"

He grinned shyly. "Just a quiet hombre, I reckon," he said. "If I had it my way I'd be over there with Cat all the time."

"Then you won't like the job I have for you!" she said. "To ride into Three Lakes with me, riding herd on a couple of pack horses."

"Three Lakes?" He looked up so sharply it startled her. "Into town? I never go into town, ma'am. I don't like the place. Not any town."

"Why, that's silly! Anyway, there's no one else, and Uncle Frank won't let me go alone with Pete Vorys around."

"He wouldn't bother a girl, would he?"

"You sure don't know Pete Vorys!" Sue returned grimly. "He does pretty much what he feels like and everybody's afraid to say anything about it. Although," she added, "with this new partner he's got he's toned down some. But come on—you'll go?"

Reluctantly, he got to his feet. She looked at him curiously, not a little piqued. Any other hand on the ranch would have jumped at the chance, and here she had deliberately made sure there were no others available before going to him. Her few distant glimpses of Rock Casady had excited her interest, and she wanted to know him better.

Yet as the trail fell behind them, she had to admit she was getting no place. For shyness there was some excuse, although usually even the most bashful hand lost it when alone with her. Rock Casady was almost sullen and all she could get out of him were monosyllables.

THE truth was that the nearer they drew to Three Lakes the more worried Rock grew. It had been six months since he had been in a town, and while it was improbable he would see anyone he knew, there was always a chance. Cowhands were notoriously footloose and fancy free. Once the story of his backing out of a gunfight got around, he would be through in this country, and he was tired of running.

Yet Three Lakes looked quiet enough as they ambled placidly down the street and tied up in front of the general store. He glanced at Sue tentatively.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'd sure appreciate it if you didn't stay too long. Towns make me nervous."

She looked at him, more than slightly irritated. Her trip with him, so carefully planned, had thus far come to nothing, although she had to admit he was the finest looking man she had ever seen, and his smile was quick and attractive.

"I won't be long. Why don't you go have a drink? It might do you good!" She said the last sentence a little sharply, and he looked quickly at her, but she was already flouncing into the store, as well as any girl could flounce in jeans.

Slowly he built a cigarette, studying the Hackamore Saloon over the way. He had to admit he was tempted, and probably he was foolish to think that he would get into trouble or that anyone would know him. Nevertheless, he sat down suddenly on the edge of the board walk and lighted his smoke.

He was still sitting there when he

heard the sound of booted heels on the boardwalk, and then heard a raucous voice.

"Hey! Lookit here! One of them no 'count Three Spokers in town! I didn't think any of them had the sand!"

In spite of himself, he looked up, knowing instantly that this man was Pete Vorys.

He was broad in the shoulder, with narrow hips. He had a swarthy face with dark, brilliant eyes. That he had been drinking was obvious but he was far from drunk. With him were two tough-looking hands, both grinning cynically at him.

Vorys was spoiling for a fight. He had never been whipped and doubted there lived a man who could whip him in a tooth-and-nail knock-down and drag-out battle. This Three Spoker looked big enough to be fun.

"That's a rawhide outfit, anyway," Vorys sneered. "I've a mind to ride out there sometime, just for laughs. Wonder where they hooked this ranny?"

Despite himself, Rock was growing angry. He was not wearing a gun, and Vorys was. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked at it. Expecting trouble, a crowd was gathering. He felt his neck growing red.

"Hey, you!" Vorys booted him solidly in the spine, and the kick hurt. At the same time he slapped Casady with his sombrero. Few things are more calculated to enrage a man.

Rock came to his feet with a lunge. As he turned, with his right palm he grabbed the ankle of Vorys' boot, and with his left fist he smashed him in the stomach, jerking up on the leg. The move was so sudden, so totally unexpected that there was no chance to spring back. Pete Vorys hit the boardwalk flat on his shoulder blades!

A whoop of delight went up from the crowd and for an instant, Pete Vorys lay stunned. Then with an oath he came off the walk, lunging to his feet.

Rock sprang back, his hands wide. "I'm not packin' a gun!" he yelled.

"I don't need a gun!" Vorys yelled. It was the first time he had ever hit the ground in a fight and he was furious.

He stepped in, driving a left to the head. Rock was no boxer. Indeed, he had rarely fought except in fun. He took that blow now, a stunning wallop on the cheekbone. At the same moment, he let go with a wicked right swing. The punch caught Vorys on the chin and rocked him to his heels.

More astonished than hurt, he sprang in and threw two swings for Rock's chin, and Casady took them both coming in. A tremendous light seemed to burst in his brain, but the next instant he had Pete Vorys in his hands. Grabbing him by the collar and the belt, he heaved him to arm's length overhead and hurled him into the street. Still dazed from the punches he had taken, he sprang after the bigger man, and seizing him before he could strike more than an ineffectual punch, swung him to arm's length overhead again, and slammed him into the dust!

Four times he grabbed the hapless bully and hurled him to the ground while the crowd whooped and cheered. The last time, his head clearing, he grabbed Vorys' shirt front with his left hand and swung three times into his face, smashing his nose and lips. Then he lifted the man and heaved him into the water tank with such force that water showered around him.

Beside himself, Rock wheeled on the two startled men who had walked with Vorys. Before either could make a move, he grabbed them by their belts. One swung on Rock's face, but he merely ducked his head and heaved. The man's feet flew up and he hit the ground on his back. Promptly, Rock stacked the other atop him.

The man started to get up, and Rock swung on his face, knocking him into a sitting position. Then grabbing him, he heaved him into the water tank with Vorys who was scrambling to get out. Then he dropped the third man into the pool and putting a hand in Vorys' face, shoved him back.

FOR an instant then, while the street rocked with cheers and yells of delight, he stood, panting and staring. Suddenly, he was horrified. In his rage he had not thought of what this would mean, but suddenly he knew that they would be hunting him now with guns. He must face a shoot out, or skip the country!

Wheeling, he shoved through the crowd, aware that someone was clinging to his arm. Looking down, he saw Sue beside him. Her eyes were bright

with laughter and pride.

"Oh, Rock! That was wonderful. Just *wonderful!*"

"Let's get out of town!" he said quickly. "Now!"

So pleased was she by the discomfiture of Pete Vorys and his hands by a Three Spoker that she thought nothing of his haste. His eye swelling and his nose still dripping occasional drops of blood, they hit the trail for the home ranch. All the way, Sue babbled happily over his standing up for the Three Spoke, and what it meant, and all the while all he could think of was the fact that on the morrow Vorys would be looking for him with a gun.

He could not face him. It was far better to avoid a fight than to prove himself yellow, and if he fled the country now, they would never forget what he had done, and always make excuses for him. If he stayed behind and showed his yellow streak, he would be ruined.

Frank Stockman was standing on the steps when they rode in, and he took one look at Rock's battered face and torn shirt and came off the steps.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Was it that Pete Vorys again?"

Tom Bell and two other hands were walking up from the bunkhouse, staring at Rock. But already, while he stripped the saddles from the horses, Sue Landon was telling the story, and it lost nothing in the telling. Rock Casady of the Three Spoke had not only whipped Pete Vorys soundly, but he had ducked Pete and two of his tough hands in the Three Lakes' water tank!

The hands crowded around him, crowing and happy, slapping him on the back and grinning. Sandy Kane gripped his hand.

"Thanks, pardner," he said grimly, "I don't feel so bad now!"

Rock smiled weakly, but inside he was sick. It was going to look bad, but he was pulling out. He said nothing, but after supper he got his own horse and threw the saddle aboard, then rustled his gear. When he was all packed, he drew a deep breath and walked toward the ranchhouse.

Stockman was sitting on the wide veranda with Bell and Sue. She got up when he drew near, her eyes bright. He avoided her glance, suddenly aware of how much her praise and happiness meant to him. In his weeks on the Three Spoke, while he had never talked to her before today, his eyes had followed her every move.

"How are you, son?" Stockman said jovially. "You've made this a red letter day on the Three Spoke! Come up an' sit down! Bell was just talking here, he says he needs a segundo, an' I reckon he's right. How'd you like the job? Eighty a month?"

He swallowed. "Sorry, boss. I got to be movin'. I want my time."

"You *what?*" Bell took his pipe from his mouth and stared.

"I got to roll my hoop," he said stiffly. "I don't want trouble."

Frank Stockman came quickly to his feet. "But listen, man!" he protested. "You've just whipped the best man around this country! You've made a place for yourself here! The boys think you're great! So do I! So does Tom! As for Sue here, all she's done is talk about how wonderful you are! Why, son, you came in here a drifter, an' now you've made a place for yourself! Stick around! We need men like you!"

Despite himself, Casady was wavering. This was what he had always wanted, and wanted now, since the bleak months of his lonely riding, more than ever. A place where he was at home, men who liked him, and a girl. . . .

"Stay on," Stockman said more quietly. "You can handle any trouble that comes, and I promise you, the Three Spoke will back any play you make! Why, with you to head 'em we can run Pete Vorys and that slick partner of his, that Ben Kerr, clean out of the country!"

Casady's face blanched. "*Who?* Did you say, *Ben Kerr?*"

"Why, sure!" Stockman stared at him curiously, aware of the shocked expression on Rock's face. "Ben Kerr's the hombre who come in here to side Vorys! He's the smart one who's puttin' all those fancy ideas in Pete's head! He's a brother-in-law of Vorys, or something!"

Ben Kerr—here!

THAT settled it. He could not stay now. There was no time to stay. His mind leaped ahead. Vorys would tell his story, of course. His name would be mentioned, and if not his name, his description. Kerr would know, and he wouldn't waste time. Why, even now. . . !

"Give me my money!" Casady said sharply. "I'm movin' out right now! Thanks for all you've offered, but I'm ridin'! I want no trouble!"

Stockman's face stiffened. "Why, sure," he said, "if you feel that way about it!" He took a roll of bills from his pocket and coolly paid over the money, then abruptly he turned his back and walked inside.

Casady wheeled, his heart sick within him, and started for the corral. He heard running steps behind him, then a light touch on his arm. He looked down, his eyes miserable, into Sue's face.

"Don't go, Rock!" she pleaded gently. "Please don't go! We all want you to stay!"

He shook his head. "I can't Sue! I can't stay. I want no gun trouble!"

There—it was out.

She stepped back and slowly her face changed. Girl that she was, she still had grown up in the tradition of the West. A man fought his battles with gun or fist, he did not run away.

"Oh?" Her amazed contempt cut him like a whip. "So that's it? You're afraid to face a gun? Afraid of your life?" She stared at him. "Why, Rock Casady," her voice lifted as realization broke over her, "you're *yellow!*"

Hours later, far back in the darkness of night in the mountains, her words rang in his ears. She had called him yellow! She had called him a coward!

Rock Casady, sick at heart, rode slowly into the darkness. At first he rode with no thought but to escape, and then as his awareness began to return, he studied the situation. Lee's Ferry was northeast, and to the south he was bottled by the Colorado Canyon. North it was mostly Vorys' range and west lay Three Lakes and the trails leading to it. East the Canyons fenced him off also, but east lay a lonely, little-known country, ridden only by Cat McLeod in his wanderings after varmints that preyed upon Three Spoke cattle. In that wilderness he might find someplace to hole up. Cat still had plenty of supplies, and he could borrow some from him . . . Suddenly he remembered the canyon Cat had mentioned, the Pleasant Valley Outlet.

He would not go near Cat. There was game enough, and he had packed away a few things in the grub line when he had rolled his soogan. He found an intermittent stream that trailed down a ravine toward Kane Canyon, and followed it. Pleasant Valley Outlet was not far south of Kane. It would be a good hideout. After a few weeks, when the excitement was over, he could slip out of the country.

In a lonely canyon that opened from the south wall into Pleasant Valley Canyon, he found a green and lovely spot. There was plenty of driftwood and a cave hollowed from the Kaibab sandstone by wind and water. There he settled down. Days passed into weeks, and he lived on wild game, berries, and fish. Yet his mind kept turning northwestward toward the Three Spoke, and his thoughts gave him no rest.

On an evening almost three weeks after his escape from the Three Spoke, he was putting his coffee on when he heard a slight sound. Looking up he saw old Cat McLeod grinning at him.

"Howdy, son!" he chuckled. "When you head for the tall timber you sure do a job of it! My land! I thought I'd never find you! No more trail'n trout swimmin' upstream!"

Rock arose stiffly. "Howdy, Cat. Just put the coffee on." He averted his eyes, and went about the business of preparing a meal.

Cat seated himself, seemingly unhurried and undisturbed by his scant welcome. He got out his pipe and stuffed it full of tobacco. He talked calmly and quietly about game and fish, and the mountain trails.

"Old Mormon crossin' not far from here," he said, "I could show you where it is."

After they had eaten McLeod leaned back against a rock. "Lots of trouble back at the Three Spoke. I reckon you was the smart one, pullin' out when you did."

Casady made no response, so McLeod continued. "Pete Vorys was some beat up. Two busted ribs, busted nose, some teeth gone. Feller name of Ben Kerr came out to the Three Spoke huntin' you. Said you was a yella dog an' he knowed you of old. He laughed when he said that, an' said the whole Three Spoke outfit was yella. Stockman, he wouldn't take that, so he went for his gun. Kerr shot him."

Rock's head came up with a jerk. "Shot Stockman? He killed him?"

There was horror in his voice. This was his fault—*his!*

"No, he ain't dead. He's sure bad off, though. Kerr added injury to insult by runnin' off a couple of hundred head of Three Spoke stock. Shot one hand doin' it."

A LONG silence followed in which the two men smoked moodily. Finally, Cat looked across the fire at Rock.

"Son, there's more'n one kind of courage, I say. I seen many a dog stand up to a grizzly that would high-tail it from a skunk. Back yonder they say you're yella. Me, I don't figure it so."

"Thanks, Cat," Rock replied simply, miserably. "Thanks a lot, but you're wrong. I am yellow."

"Reckon it takes pretty much of a man to say that, son. But from what I hear you sure didn't act it against Pete an' his riders. You walloped the tar out of them!"

"With my hands it's different. It's —it's—guns."

McLeod was silent. He poked a twig into the fire and relighted his pipe.

"Ever kill a man, son?" His eyes probed Rock's, and he saw the young rider's head nod slowly. "Who was it? How'd it happen?"

"It was—" he looked up, his face drawn and pale. "I killed my brother, Cat."

McLeod was shocked. His old eyes went wide. "You killed your brother? Your *own* brother?"

Rock Casady nodded. "Yeah," he said bitterly, "my own brother. The one person in this world that really mattered to me!"

Cat stared, then slowly his brow puckered. "Son," he said, "why don't you tell me about it? Get it out of your system, like."

For a long while Rock was silent, then he started to speak.

"It was down in Texas. We had a little spread down there, Jack and me. He was a shade older, but always protectin' me, although I sure didn't need it. The finest man who ever walked, he was.

"Well, we had us a mite of trouble, an' this here Ben Kerr was the ringleader. I had trouble with Ben, and he swore to shoot me on sight. I was a hand with a gun, like you know, an' I was ready enough to fight, them days. One of the hands told me, an' without a word to Jack, I lit into the saddle an' headed for town.

"Kerr was gun-slick, but I wasn't worried. I knew that I didn't have scarcely a friend in town, an' that his whole outfit would be there. It was me against them, an' I went into town with two guns, an' sure enough on the prod.

"It was gettin' late when I hit town. A man I knowed told me Ben was around with his outfit and that nobody was goin' to back me one bit, them all bein' scared of Ben's boys. He told me, too, that Ben Kerr would shoot me in the back as soon as not he bein' that kind.

"I went huntin' him. Kidlike, an' never in no fight before, I was jumpy, mighty jumpy. The light was bad. All of a sudden, I saw one of Ben's boys step out of a door ahead of me. He called out, 'Here he is, Ben! Take him!' Then I heard runnin' feet behind me, heard 'em slide to a halt, an' I wheeled, drawin' as I turned, an' fired." His voice sank to a whisper.

Cat, leaning forward, said, "You shot? An' then . . .?"

"It was Jack. It was my own brother. He'd heard I was in town alone an' he come runnin' to back me up. I drilled him dead center!"

Cat McLeod stared up at the young man, utterly appalled. In his kindly old heart he could only guess at the horror that must have filled Casady, then scarcely more than a boy, when he had looked down into that still, dead face and seen his brother.

"Gosh, son." He shook his head in amazed sympathy. "It ain't no wonder you hate gun fights! It sure ain't! But . . . ?" He scowled. "I still don't see . . . ." His voice trailed away.

Rock drew a deep breath. "I sold out then, and left the country. Went to ridin' for an outfit near El Paso. One night I come into town with the other hands, an' who do I run into but Ben Kerr. He thought I ran because I was afraid of him, an' he got tough. He called me—right in front of the outfit. I was goin' to draw, but all I could see there in front of me was Jack, with that blue hole between his eyes! I turned and ran."

Cat McLeod stared at Rock, then into the fire. It was no wonder, he reflect-

ed. He probably would have run too. If he had drawn he would have been firing on the image of the brother. It would have been like killing him over again.

"Son," he said slowly, "I know how you feel, but stop a minute an' think about Jack, this brother of yours. He always protected you, you say. He always stood up for you. Now don't you suppose he'd understand? You thought you was all alone in that town. You'd every right in the world to think that was Ben Kerr behind you. I would have thought so, an' I wouldn't have wasted no time shootin', neither.

"You can't run away from yourself. You can't run no further. Someday you got to stand an' face it, an' it might as well be now. Look at it like this: Would your brother want you livin' like this? Hunted an' scared? He sure wouldn't! Son, ever' man has to pay his own debt an' live his own life. Nobody can do it for you, but if I was you, I'd sort of figure my brother was dead because of *Ben Kerr*, an' I'd stop runnin'!"

Rock looked up slowly. "Yeah," he agreed, "I see that plain. But what if when I stepped out to meet him, *I look up an' see Jack's face again?*"

His eyes dark with horror, Rock Casady turned and plunged downstream, stumbling, swearing in his fear and loneliness and sorrow.

AT daylight, old Cat McLeod opened his eyes. For an instant, he lay still. Then he realized where he was, and what he had come for, and he turned his head. Rock Casady, his gear and horse, were gone. Stumbling to his feet, McLeod slipped on his boots and walked out in his red flannels to look at the trail.

It headed south, away from Three Lakes, and away from Ben Kerr. Rock Casady was running again.

The trail south to the canyon was rough and rugged. The palouse was sure-footed and had a liking for the mountains, yet seemed 'undecided, as though the feeling persisted that he was going the wrong way.

Casady stared bleakly ahead, but he saw little of the orange and red of the sandstone cliffs. He was seeing again Frank Stockman's strong, kindly face, and remembering his welcome at the Three Spoke. He was remembering Sue's hand on his sleeve and her quick smile, and old Tom Bell, gnarled and worn with handling cattle and men. He drew up suddenly and turned the horse on the narrow trail. He was going back.

"Jack," he said suddenly aloud, "stick with me, boy. I'm sure goin' to need you now!"

* * * *

Sandy Kane, grim-lipped and white of face, dismounted behind the store. Beside him was Sue Landon.

"Miss Sue," he said, "you get that buyin' done fast. Don't let none of that Vorys crowd see you. They've sure taken this town over since they shot the boss."

"All right, Sandy." She looked at him bravely, then squeezed the older man's hand. "We'll make it, all right." Her blue eyes darkened. "I wish I'd been a man, Sandy. Then the boys would come in and clean up this outfit!"

"Miss Sue," he said gently, "don't fret none. Our boys are just honest cowhands. We don't have a gunfighter in the lot, nobody who could stand up to Kerr or Vorys. No man minds a scrap, but it would be plain suicide!"

The girl started to enter the store, then caught the cowboy's hand.

"Sandy," she said faintly, "look!"

A tall man with broad shoulders had swung down before the store. He tied his horse with a slip knot, and hitched his guns into place. Rock Casady, his hard young face bleak and desperate, stared carefully along the street.

It was only three blocks long, this street. It was dusty and warm with the noon-day sun. The gray-fronted buildings looked upon the dusty canal that separated them, and a few saddled horses stamped lazily, flicking their tails at casual flies. It was like that other street, so long ago.

Casady pulled the flat brim of his black hat a little lower over his eyes. Inside he felt sick and faint. His mouth was dry. His tongue trembled when it touched his lips. Up the street a man saw him and got slowly to his feet, staring as if hypnotized. The man backed away, then dove into the Hackamore Saloon.

Rock Casady took a deep breath, drew his shoulders back, and started slowly down the walk. He seemed in a

trance where only the sun was warm and the air was still. Voices murmured. He heard a gasp of astonishment, for these people remembered that he had whipped Pete Vorys, and they knew what he had come for.

He wore two guns now, having dug the other gun and belt from his saddlebags to join the one he had only worn in the mountains. A door slammed somewhere.

Ben Kerr stared at the face of the man in the door of the saloon.

"Ben, here comes that yellow backed Casady! And he's wearin' a gun!"

"He is, is he?" Kerr tossed off his drink. "Fill that up, Jim! I'll be right back. This will only take a minute!"

He stepped out into the street. "Come to get it this time?" he shouted tauntingly. "Or are you runnin' again?"

Rock Casady made no reply. His footsteps echoed hollowly on the board walk, and he strode slowly, finishing his walk at the intersecting alley, stepping into the dust, then up on the walk again.

Ben Kerr's eyes narrowed slightly. Some sixth sense warned him that the man who faced him had subtly changed. He lifted his head a little, and stared, then he shrugged off the feeling and stepped out from the building.

"All right, Yella-Belly! If you want it!" His hand swept down in a flashing arc and his gun came up.

Rock Casady stared down the street at the face of Ben Kerr, and it was only the face of Kerr. In his ear was Jack's voice: "Go ahead, kid! Have at it!"

Kerr's gun roared and he felt the hot breath of it bite at his face. And then suddenly, Rock Casady laughed! Within him all was light and easy, and it was almost carelessly that he stepped forward. Suddenly the .44 began to roar and buck in his hand, leaping like a live thing within his grasp. Kerr's gun flew high in the air, his knees buckled, and he fell forward on his face in the dust.

Rock Casady turned quickly toward the Hackamore. Pete Vorys stood in the door, shocked to stillness.

"All right, Pete! Do you want it or are you leavin' town?"

Vorys stared from Kerr's riddled body to the man holding the gun.

"Why, I'm leavin' town!" Vorys said. "That's my roan, right there. I'll just . . ." As though stunned, he started to mount, and Rock's voice arrested him.

"No, Pete. You walk. You hoof it. And start now!"

The bully of Three Lakes wet his lips and stared, then his eyes shifted to the body in the street.

"Sure, Rock," he said, taking a step back. "I'll hoof it." Turning, stumbling a little, he started to walk. As he moved, his walk grew swifter and swifter as though something followed in his tracks.

Rock turned and looked up, and Sue Landon was standing on the boardwalk.

"Oh, Rock! You came back!"

"Don't reckon I ever really left, Sue," he said slowly. "My heart's been right here, all the time!"

She caught his arm, and the smile in her eyes and on her lips was bright. He looked down at her.

Then he said aloud, "Thanks, Jack!"

She looked up quickly. "What did you say?"

He grinned at her. "Sue," he said, "did I ever tell you about my brother? He was one grand hombre! Someday, I'll tell you." They walked back toward the horses, her hand on his arm.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

HANGED MAN'S REP

An Exciting Novelet of Rustler Guns

By WALT COBURN

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

Here are the facts about the passing of the buffalo herds that once roamed the plains, as seen by some old-time frontiersmen!

by JOHN EDWARD DALTON

"Lying there, I remember whispering a prayer to myself"

the BUILDING of the WEST

TUCSON sweltered in a July heat. You could fry an egg on the concrete sidewalks. John Slaughter, Tombstone ex-sheriff and cattleman, Billy Breakenridge, Arizona peace-officer, and myself, leaned against the Santa Rita Bar listening to a little group of big game hunters.

"The slaughter of the buffalo," declared one, "was little short of murder. If the meat had been used to feed the hungry, it wouldn't have been so bad. But only the hide, and a few steaks from the hump were used. The carcass rotted on the prairie or went into the bellies of predatory animals or birds of prey. America's mightiest of all game," concluded the speaker, "was wiped out."

I stole a glance at John Slaughter. I knew he had killed thousands of hump backs for their hides, and I heard my father say he paid his cowboys one dollar

bounty for the tail of every buffalo they brought into camp. We finished our drink in silence.

Then Slaughter said, "Let's get out of here before I speak out of turn and hurt somebody's feelings."

We pushed our way through the swinging doors into the glaring sun and headed for the Congress Hotel bar. After Billy ordered a round of tall cool ones, I turned to the old cattleman.

"What about the buffalo, John?" I asked him. "Was it murder?"

Buffalo Were Doomed

"No!" John snapped. "It was either the cattlemen or the hump backs. There was no middle of the road course. It was impossible to run cattle in a buffalo country. Buffalo were thicker than sheep on the red desert of Montana. There were millions of them and the deep grass was fast disappearing. In another ten years, at the most, the hills, the mountains and prairies would have been as bare as a bald-headed man, and they would have starved to death. The buffalo hunter merely set their passing ahead ten years.

"I remember when I first came to Tombstone and settled in the heart of the Curly Bill and John Ringo outlaw country. I had a herd of ten thousand head fattening between Tombstone and a little Mexican town to the north. We were close herding the long horns because buffalo were thicker than fleas on a dog's back. As far as you could see in any direction buffalo spotted the prairie. My cowboys were kept on the run keeping the buffalo from mixing with the Oreananes.

"The Apache Kid and Al Seebergs, Indian Scout, had gone sour on the white man and were robbing, murdering, and burning isolated ranches. From a hilltop he and his brother-in-law, Hanging Dog, saw our cattle in the middle of a sea of buffalo. The wind was blowing from the Kid to us. With a flint and steel they started a prairie fire.

"The grass was like tinder, and in a matter of minutes flames were leaping twenty feet in the air and spreading and advancing with the speed of a loping horse. The buffalo stampeded.

"My cowboys were helpless. They did their best to save the longhorns, but the buffalo herd broke through and carried them along. I found twenty-five head weeks later, and three cowboys and my cook died under trampling hoofs of the stampede. My mess Hoolahan and Demograt wagon were demolished. A steam-roller couldn't have done a better job. I near went out of the cattle business when I lost that herd.

"Another time," continued John Slaughter, "I was saving a big mountain meadow in the San Bernadino's for a winter range. The grass was up to a pony's knees. I aimed to fatten a bunch of Mexican longhorns on it. A mighty big herd of buffalo moved in and cropped it off. For three days the herd moved slowly north in an unbroken column several miles wide. When the last stragglers had disappeared they left nothing but a wide dusty trail in their wake. Even the roots were pawed up and eaten."

"It wasn't only the cattleman who suffered from the buffalo," said Billy Breakenridge. "You remember, don't you, John, when the Golden Spike was driven and the rails met making California and New York neighbors? Thousands of immigrant cars rolled into Abilene, Wichita, and Dodge loaded with the families and worldly possessions of the settlers, most of them long on kids and short on grub? You remember their high hopes when their plows sank into the rich prairie loam and turned it upside down and planted the fields to corn, wheat, and oats?

"That first year of the fool hoeman was a bumper crop. Corn and grain grew taller than a man's head. Towns and grain elevators mushroomed over night along the railroad right of way. A wave of prosperity swept the country. Eastern money filled Western banks. A fool hoeman with a good crop was sitting on top of the world. Banks and stores gave him unlimited credit. I reckon, John, those waving fields of golden grain were the most beautiful sight I ever saw."

Old-Timers Warn Farmers

"But there was one thing, farmer and capitalist alike, forgot," said Breakenridge. "That was the herds of buffalo that were on their summer range to the north. Old-timers like Dog Kelly, Kirk Jorden, the Earps and the Mastersons tried to warn the tenderfoot, but their warnings fell on deaf ears.

"'We will cross that bridge when we get to it,' they said.

"Fall came, the green fields turned to gold, thrashing machines and harvesters were unloaded onto depot platforms and driven out to the farms. In a few days the bumper crop would be ready to harvest and grain would pour in an unending stream into the elevators on the first leg of a long journey that would end only in the flour mills of the Middlewest.

"I was standing," said Billy Breakenridge, "on the depot platform at Dodge with a ticket in my pocket for Los Angeles, watching some kids playing marbles for keeps. I heard a yell from the direction of Hell Town across the tracks.

"'Here come the buffalo! There's a million of them. Look at them, boys—marching just like soldiers!'

"At the city limits of Dodge, the herd split and passed on both sides of the town. Wire fences snapped like cotton twine in front of the mass of beasts and the herds moved relentlessly into the fields. For days the migration continued and when it had passed the farm lands were bare. A Kansas jackrabbit couldn't have gotten a breakfast off a hundred and sixty acres.

"That winter the farmers of Kansas were on short rations. The banks went broke, mercantile stores had no credit and closed their doors. The fool hoeman and their families went on starvation rations, they left their squatters rights by the thousands. Rutted roads were clogged with rickety emigrant wagons rumbling through dust and mud back to the country they had left a scant year before.

"While the herds of buffalo infested the West there was no chance of settling it. Like huge four-footed locusts they destroyed everything in their path. The buffalo hunter was the real empire builder of the West. He made it possible for the homesteader and the cattleman to prosper. His roaring Henry's and Sharps rifles laid the buffalo low and laid the foundations of villages, towns, and cities at the same time."

"You are dead right, Billy," agreed John Slaughter. "I've known hundreds of hide hunters. Among their ranks were good men and bad, hard men and gentle, gunmen and gamblers, men from every walk of life. But one characteristic that stood out in the makeup of every buffalo hunter was his courage. There wasn't a coward in ten thousand. Their work was dangerous—death like two huge vultures rode on their shoulders. Money was plentiful today and gone tomorrow. Their friendships were hard and fast. Their tempers were sudden and deadly. The boot hills of the hell towns held their share of the buffalo hunter."

Alvord's Buffalo Yarn

While listening to Billy Breakenridge and John Slaughter, I remembered a story told to me by Burt Alvord, the Tombstone train-robber. He had been on the dodge for a number of years and cut his suspenders for Canada. When I ran across him he was riding fence for Lord Ogilvee, a wealthy squaw-man, whose headquarters ranch was close to Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, Canada.

It was in the dead of winter. Burt and I hugged a red hot pot-bellied stove as we smoked twirlies and talked of the good old U.S.A. Alvord didn't like Canada, but he couldn't do anything about it. While we swapped yarns he said, "Did I ever tell you about the time Wild Bill Hickok and I got caught in front of a buffalo stampede?"

I shook my head. "No," I replied.

"Well," began Burt, "it happened like this. There was a bunch of miners in Cheyenne that wanted to prospect in the Black Hills. They had a good wagon-train, stout mules and plenty of guns and ammunition, but were afraid to strike out across the Indian or outlaw

country without a guide. So they hired Wild Bill Hickok to get them through with their hair on straight. And Wild Bill hired me.

"We left Cheyenne on a Sunday morning. I remember listening to the church bells and wondering if my mother and sister were in their usual pew at the Reverend Peabody's little church in Tombstone. We made about ten miles the first day and about thirty the second.

"Daylight was only a vague promise in the east when we dipped in the Dutch ovens for our breakfast the third day out. A mule-skinner shouted to Wild Bill, 'Do you hear anything, Cap?'

"Bill brushed his long blond locks back from his ears and listened intently. There was a faint rumble off to the north. It grew louder. Some of the miners thought it was thunder and that we were going to have a storm. But Wild Bill shook his head.

"'A buffalo stampede!' he shouted. 'And a mighty big one. Get the mules spanned in, and the wagons loaded. You'd better step on it because we haven't got a second to spare.'

"The leaders of the stampeding herd were a scant hundred yards from camp when the first skinner cracked his bullwhip and cursed the six-mule hitch into a high lope.

"Bill and I were on horseback. We galloped behind the last wagon and fired our Henry rifles into the leaders' faces. We might just as well have thrown handfuls of pebbles at them for all the good it did. I haven't prayed many times in my life, but this was one time I did, and meant every word I said."

A Race for Life

"Luckily we were on a big flat and didn't have to stick to the road," Alvord continued. "At the end of the first five miles our mules were beginning to slow down and blow. The skinners' blacksnake whips were popping on the leaders' flanks and hips like rifle shots and you could hear them curse over the roar of the stampede. The herd must have run quite a ways before they jumped us because they were slowing down and blowing too. How many buffalo were in that stampede I don't know, but there must have been thousands.

"The flat behind us was crowded and the drags were still coming down off the foot hills. The air was filled with choking alkali dust. Wild Bill and I had handkerchiefs tied over our noses and mouths so we wouldn't choke. I turned in my saddle to take a shot at one of the leaders, a big bull. My pony stumbled, staggered, and went down end over end. I fell clear and my horse ran off. Lying there, I remember whispering a prayer to myself. 'Good-by, Burt, old man,' I said, then. 'This is the end.' But it wasn't. Wild Bill Hickok spun his famous black race mare on a dime, reached down and pulled me up behind him under the very noses of the leaders. It seems that was the turning point of the stampede. The buffalo began to slow up. In another mile they stopped, their massive heads drooping and front legs spraddled.

"We pulled on for a couple of more miles and stopped beside a little stream and made camp. The miners and mule skinners talked of nothing else for days, but Wild Bill's only comment was when I thanked him for saving my life. 'Think nothing of it, cowboy. You'd have done the same for me.' He hesitated for a second, then continued, 'I reckon that's as close to the Happy Hunting Ground as I ever came.'"

With the passing of the buffalo and the men who killed them civilization marched steadily forward and the West became the Land of Opportunity.

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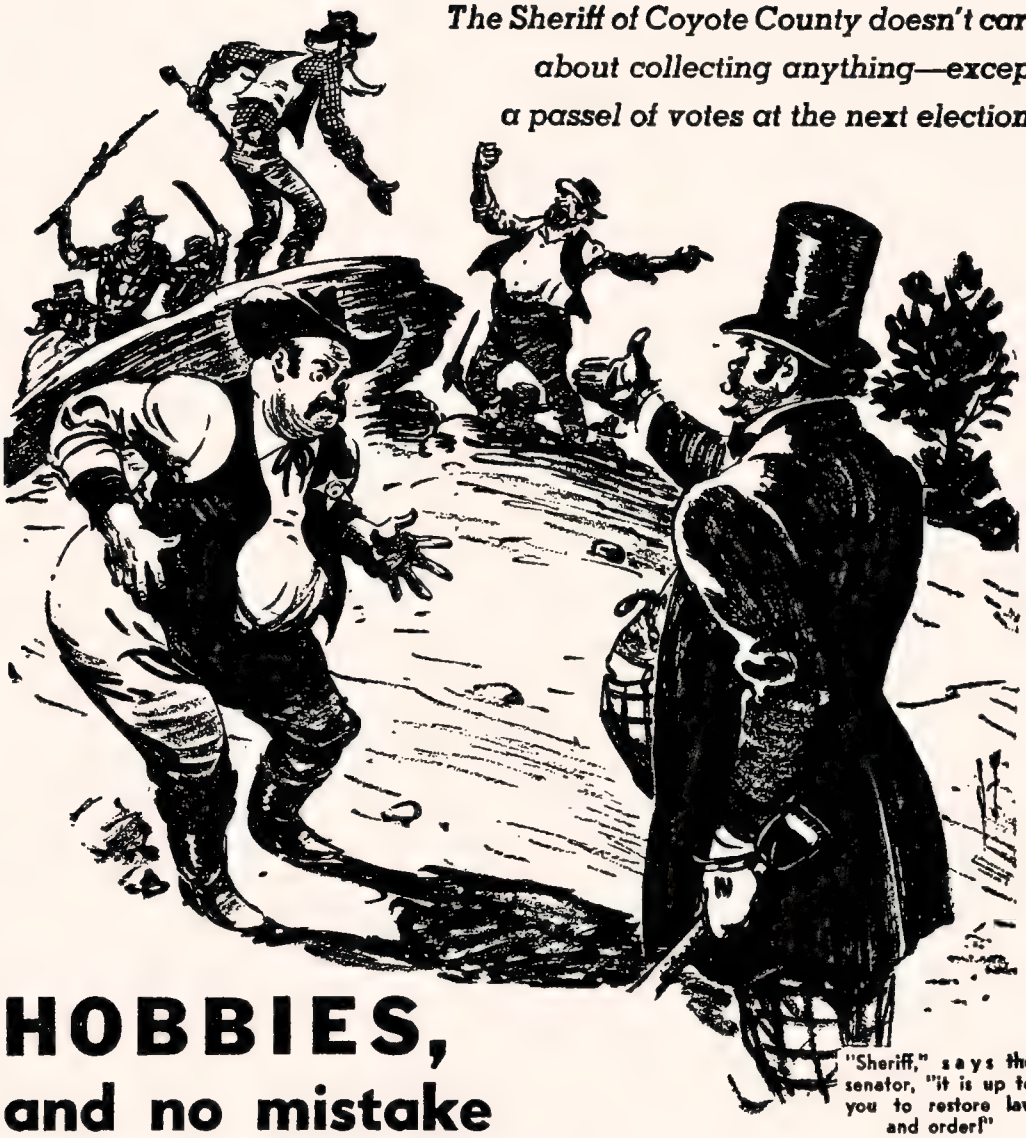
A SIX-STAR SPECIAL NEXT ISSUE!

Featuring Novels, Novelets and Stories by NORMAN A. FOX, WALT COBURN, EDWIN L. SABIN, W. C. TUTTLE, B. M. BOWER and CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER!

The Sheriff of Coyote County doesn't care about collecting anything—except a passel of votes at the next election!



"Sheriff," says the senator, "it is up to you to restore law and order!"

HOBBIES, and no mistake

I AM eating breakfast with my wife when she looks up from a magazine she is reading.

"Hopewell," she says, "here is a no little interesting article about hobbies. All great men have hobbies. It takes their mind off their worries."

"At the present moment," I say, "even if I am deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., and the next election is close at hand, I have got no worries worth monkeying around and about a hobby with. Unless it is that I am flat broke and—"

"Not one cent!" she says, eyeing me somewhat unfriendly. "Incidental, I am going to start a hobby collecting funny looking bottles, or something."

"Why," I say gullible, "what have you

A Boo Boo Bounce Story by BEN FRANK

got to worry about?"

"I have got you, Hopewell," she says. "A man who does not keep the woodbox filled and spends his time playing checkers—"

Seeing an argument approaching, I put on my hat and depart, thinking that a married gent such as I should ought to have himself a hobby to keep his mind off his worries, also. But it is a fine day, and no mistake, and I grow somewhat cheerful again, walking along Polecat's one street until I come to where Chinnick Chancey is leaning against his barber pole. In his hand is a small card, which he gives to me with a sour grin.

ON the card, I see the words: "FRIENDLY FREDERICK, THE MAN WITH A THOUSAND SMILES. A VOTE FOR FREDERICK FOR SHERIFF IS A VOTE FOR LAW AND ORDER!"

Instantaneous, a slight chill moves along my spine, and then some, for should Friendly Frederick win over Boo Boo Bounce, who is sheriff and my boss, I would no longer be deputy.

"Looks like Boo Boo is in for trouble," Chin-nick says.

"Poo-poo!" I snort, brave.

"People is somewhat fed up with Boo Boo on account of he don't seem able to find out who is stealing things around and about," Chin-nick goes on, cozy. "Also—"

"Sugar-shoot!" I exclaim. "Nothing has been stole worth mentioning. Just things some kids have likely picked up, and—"

But there is no use talking further, for Chin-nick has gone inside his barber shop.

I glance up, and who should I see but Friendly Frederick himself, who is no little dapper in a black suit and a derby on his curly black hair, with a toothy smile very charming, exposing a few-odd gold fillings.

"Fine mornin', Deputy," he says in a very pleasant basso. "Although I can hardly expect yuh to vote for me, here is one of my cards—but I see yuh already have my card."

He goes on along the street very jaunty, and I cannot help but think how much handsomer a tall, slim gent like him is than Boo Boo Bounce, who is fat, bald, red-faced and about as pretty as a hippopotamus with his mouth open.

Presently I come to Jigger Joe's Emporium, where at Grandpa Groover, who is the oldest living citizen of Coyote County, is standing by the batwing, smoking his clay pipe.

"Hopewell," he says, "did I ever tell yuh about the time I fit in the Battle of Coon Hill? Them Injuns was as thick as weeds in a turnip patch, an' I run out of ammunition. So I—"

"Yes, Grandpa," I say, "you've told me about it before."

I hurry on, for Grandpa Groover is no little bore, telling about fighting in the Battle of Coon Hill in the early days when Polecat was nothing more than a few log cabins or so.

Next I come to the office of the Polecat News and notice that Mr. Bundy has his collection of arrowheads in the window, him being a strong authority upon Indian lore and such.

Now, old Bundy is no friend of mine or Boo Boo's, and vice versa, but I stop to look in the window, thinking that collecting arrowheads likely keeps the old stinker from worrying about how mean he is. Which is a mistake, for what should happen but he comes to the door.

"Wastin' the taxpayer's money as usual, I see, Hopewell," he says sarcastic.

"Mr. Bundy," I say indignant, "leave us not insinuate—"

"I see yuh've got one of Friendly Frederick's cards," he says, smiling caustic. "It might interest you an' that fat, no-good, over-stuffed whale of a sheriff to know that my newspaper and I are going to support Mr. Frederick one hundred per cent. Also—"

I do not wait to hear more, but hurry on to the jail office, not liking the way the wind is blowing of a sudden this morning.

When I step inside, what should I see but Boo Boo wide awake, scowling and twiddling his fat thumbs utmostly fierce.

"Deputy," he says, "do yuh realize

what is going on in our midst? This jasper, Friendly Frederick—"

"I know," I say despondent, and show him the card.

His face pales slightly, and his three chins quiver violent.

"Hopewell," he says, "never before have I had a opponent with a thousand smiles. Also, people have become somewhat chilly toward me on account of a few trifles which have been stole from time to time lately. To make a long story short, my political career is shaky, and no mistake!"

He leans across his desk and eyes me miserable. "Deputy, leave us get busy as of the present moment and do something toward assuring my victory at the election."

"Boo Boo," I say cheerful, "Friendly Frederick cannot hardly be considered a solid citizen of Coyote County, him being newly arrived and not yet settled in any occupation except running for sheriff. That is a point in your favor."

"I ain't enough," he sighs. "A man with a thousand—"

At that moment, the door opens and in comes Bing-bong Beemer, the blacksmith, a fierce scowl on his sooty face.

"Sheriff," he says wrathful, "somebody stole my hoss-shoein' hammer yesterday!"

"Kindly be calm, Bing-bong," Boo Boo says unexcited. "What would yuh say is the cash value of said hammer?"

"Why," Bing-bong says, "the cash value is practically zero, it being badly worn. But that ain't the point, Boo Boo. It's the principle of the thing. Maybe when Friendly Frederick is elected—"

"Bing-bong," Boo Boo hollers, "leave us never, never mention that name whilst I am listening, or—"

BUT he stops yelling, for Bing-bong has gone out and slammed the door very bangy.

"Worries, worries, worries," Boo Boo wails. "First a pair of patched overalls disappeared off of No-work Norton's clothesline. Then somebody stole Pop Pulley's ole pair of rubber boots. Then Stinky Joe's fryin' pan he feeds his dog in disappeared. An' now, Bing-bong's hammer. Nothin' stole is hardly worth tossing a man in jail for, yet people are saying that I, Boo Boo Bounce, am asleep at the switch."

"Boo Boo," I say helpful, "what you need is a hobby to keep your mind off your worries, such as collecting things. All great men have hobbies to keep from worrying. Mayor Mince-meat Malone collects picture post cards. Old man Lilly, our banker, collects two-dollar bills. Judge Jackson collects stamps, and old Bundy—"

"Kindly do not class me with ole Bundy," Boo Boo says frigid. "He is tooth and toe-nail for Friendly Fred—Hopewell, I cannot think of one single thing I care to collect except votes at the next election."

"In that case," I say, "what you need is a cause to promote. Like a orphant's home, or—"

And then I have such a remarkable inspiration that I jump some four feet straight up in the air.

"Boo Boo," I say excited, "I know! The Battle of Coon Hill! Should you promote building a monument on the site of the battle, people would say, Ah, Boo Boo Bounce is a public-spirited citizen, and no mistake! Leave us keep him as our sheriff.' "

Boo Boo blinks thoughtful a few times, and a slow smile spreads over his fat face.

"Deputy," he says, "how a small, pointed head such as yourn can hold so many brains is a mystery indeed! From now on, I will not only be known as sheriff of Coyote County, but also as the man who built a monument to our brave forefathers who freed our noble land from bloodshed and tomahawks. Come, leave us start the ball rolling."

We put on our hats and step outside.

"Where to, Boo Boo?" I ask.

"Mayor Mince-meat Malone's office, Deputy. Him being a staunch friend and supporter of me, and vice versa, it is only fair to let him help with our monument. Hopewell, now that I have a hobby on my mind, my worries are practically gone. Remind me to give yuh a five-

dollar bonus sometime soon."

"Thank you," I say hopeful. "At the present, I am both penniless and thirsty." But he does not take the hint.

We go into the mayor's office and find same sitting behind his desk, all dressed up in his Sunday clothes.

Boo Boo says surprised, "Is there a funeral or wedding, Mince-meat?"

"Have yuh forgot," the mayor replies, rubbing a bony hand over his long, red nose, "that today is the day Senator Blout is to be in town to put his political ear to the ground, so to speak? In fact, he is at the hotel now, waiting to see us politicians."

"I plumb forgot about ole Loud-mouth Blout coming today," Boo Boo murmurs.

"Sheriff," Mince-meat says horrified, "in by-gone days when the senator was dog-catcher of Polecat, calling him Loud-mouth was all right. But now it is hardly permissible."

"Don't worry," Boo Boo assures. "I won't call him nothin' worse than senator to his face."

"Boo Boo," I say sudden, "with Loud-mouth—I mean Senator Blout—agreeing to your hobby, you are the same as elected sheriff. Why—"

"What is this hobby business?" Mince-meat asks suspicious.

Smiling very rosy, Boo Boo explains about building a monument to the Battle of Coon Hill.

"Humm," the mayor says, looking somewhat jealous. "Why couldn't I have thunk of that? Sheriff, I congratulate yuh on bein' twice as smart as yuh look, an'—"

"It was I who thought—" I begin, but Boo Boo gives me a kick on the shin very painful.

"Leave us adjourn to the hotel to talk said proposition over with the senator," Boo Boo says.

We put on our hats and head across toward the Polecat Hotel. Who should come rushing up but Nail-head Nutter, who runs the general store, and is tearing his hair and swearing fierce.

"Boo Boo," he says, "someone has stole the padlock from off my warehouse back of the store. This thievery has got to be stopped, or else I will vote for a man who can—"

"Nail-head," Boo Boo says calm, "leave us not get excited over trifles when there is more important matters at stake."

"Such as?" Nail-head growls doubtful.

"Building a monument to the brave defenders of the Battle of Coon Hill. I have took this matter up as a hobby, and the Mayor is siding me whole-hearted. We are on our way to talk it over with Loud—Senator Blout. If yuh wish to be one of us monument builders, kindly fall in step."

"A monument, huh?" Nail-head murmurs. "Everything yuh have ever did, Boo Boo, was a bust. But maybe yuh have got something this time."

He falls in step, and we go into the hotel.

LOUD-MOUTH BLOUT is in the lobby, twirling a gold watch chain very dazzling across his oversized middle and talking to numerous citizens, including Mr. Bundy and Friendly Frederick, the man with a thousand smiles.

"It is like this, gents," he is saying with no little gusto, "a senator such as I has weighty problems on his mind. Problems of world-shaking import, an' no mistake! So I have not give much thought as yet to who I shall support for sheriff in the local election. How-someever, Mr. Bundy, I like the looks of yore man, Friendly Frederick, an' perchance I will throw my weight—"

He stops of a sudden, for he sees us coming into the room, and a no-little embarrassed look appears on his round, puffy face, which his pointed chin whiskers cannot hide.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he says very loud, shaking hands with us brotherly. "Mayor Malone, yuh look fit as a skunk in a cabbage patch. Mr. Nutter, I must drop in at yore store for some provisions. An' here's my ole friend, Boo Boo Bounce. Yuh're a sight for sore eyes, an' no mistake, Boo Boo!"

"Senator," Boo Boo says somewhat distant, "I could not help but overhear—"

"Ah, it is nice being amongst ole friends," the senator says hearty. "An', Hopewell, how is that dear wife of yourn?"

"She is taking up a hobby of collecting bottles," I say, giving Boo Boo a nudge.

"Speaking of hobbies, Senator," Boo Boo says, "I have took up for my hobby the promotion of building a monument to the Battle of Coon Hill. As yuh know, you having been a citizen of Polecat of previous years, a monument is one thing our fair city needs urgent. Prominent Polecatters, such as Nail-head and the mayor, agree on this."

"Yes, indeed," both Nail-head and Mince-meat say.

"A monument!" the senator booms. "I often thought of startin' somethin' like that myself in my dear ole home town, which I love with all my heart! Gents, I would consider it a honor to be included in this worthy movement. Also, may I add, I might persuade our beloved Uncle Sam to chip in a few smackeroos to help build—"

"Senator," I say quick, "perhaps Boo Boo could be talked into letting you turn the first shovelful of dirt if you was to support him for sheriff. What do you think, Boo Boo?"

"Why, yes, Deputy, I could be talked into that," he says.

"Boo Boo, ole friend," Loud-mouth says, slapping him on the back, "far be it from me to toss any rocks in the path of yore political career. Leave us find a shovel."

"Senator," old Bundy says, smiling somewhat pleasant for him, "although it would pain me utmostly to see Boo Boo win the election, I am not one to throw cold water on a worthy cause and yore turning a first shovelful of dirt. I have a spade at my office."

"As I allus say, no time like the present for action." The senator smiles handsome. "I trust yuh'll give us a nice write-up in the Polecat News, Mr. Bundy?"

"Yes, indeed," Bundy says. "Right on the front page."

We go over to the Polecat News, and by the time we arrive, quite a crowd is following, having heard what is in the air. We get Bundy's spade and start for Coon Hill, which is on the south side of Polecat. Suddenly I have a thought.

"Gents," I say, "there is one point we have omitted making clear. Exactly where-at will we build the monument?"

"Why," Senator Blout says, "where the battle was fought. But come to think of it, just where was the battle fought?"

"There is one man who knows exactly where," I reply. "Grandpa Groover, for he was in the middle of it."

"My deputy," Boo Boo says proud, "thinks of everything."

"Yes, indeed," the senator says, putting an affectionate arm about my shoulders. "Hopewell, if I had co-workers in Washington with yore brains and ability, the legislative wheels would grind utmostly rapid. Leave us question Grandpa Groover."

"He an' ole Disagree Dixon are behind my place, playin' hoss-shoes," Jigger Joe Jirous speaks up.

So we cut through the alley to where at Grandpa Groover and Disagree Dixon are playing horseshoes.

NEXT to Grandpa Groover, Disagree Dixon, so called because he is a great hand to disagree with people, is the oldest citizen in Polecat. Ever since anybody can remember, these two old-timers have been feuding over who is the best horseshoe player, and now we find them shaking fists at one another and swearing fierce.

"It's six to seven in my favor!" Grandpa Groover yells.

"Ain't so!" Disagree Dixon snorts through his beard. "It's six to seven in my favor, yuh dried-up, mangy ole coyote!"

They see us coming out of the alley and stop yelling.

The senator shakes hands very chummy with both and remarks they are looking younger and more chipper all the time.

"Grandpa," he says, "we are about to build a monument to the battle of Coon Hill. Since yuh practically won the battle single-handed, we wish yuh to show us

the exact spot where it was fought."

"Glad to, Loud-mouth," Grandpa Groover says, sticking out his skinny chest very important.

The senator turns slightly pink. Mayor Mince-meat Malone says reproachful, "Leave us address Mr. Blout as Senator in the future, Grandpa."

We trail along the street to Coon Hill, which is covered with numerous scrub oaks. By now most of the male Polecatters are following, all no little interested in this monument business and saying that Boo Boo deserves much credit and votes for having a hobby of building monuments. All except old man Bundy, who is very quiet, and Friendly Frederick, who is having trouble keeping his thousand smiles going.

We come to the north slope of Coon Hill, and there standing against a tree is old man Juniper, whiskers and all, who lives in a shack on top of the hill and cuts firewood in the winter.

"Hopewell," he says to me, "now what are they goin' to bury? I see Loud-mouth has a spade, an' t'other day—"

"Shh!" I say impatient. "Senator Blout to you, and we ain't buryin' nothing. We are going to build a monument to the Battle of Coon Hill, and the senator is going to dig the first shovelful of dirt."

"Dirt diggin' is right down his alley," old Juniper cracks.

At that moment, Grandpa Groover takes a pose on a flat rock and says, "Gents, yuh are now standin' on the bloody ground of the Battle of Coon Hill. At this spot, I drawed my huntin' knife —run out of ammunition, yuh recall— an' carved the hearts outa fifteen redskins quicker'n yuh can say—"

"Heh, heh!" Disagree Dixon cackles. "The ole windbag is gettin' feeble minded an' as forgetful as a three-legged coyote with a hole in his head. I recollect that battle myself. It was fit on the south side of the hill."

Grandpa Groover turns somewhat livid. "Disagree," he bellows, "when that battle was fit, yuh was still wearin' diapers!"

"Oh, no, I weren't!" Disagree yells back. "I was as much in the middle of the battle as you! An' it was fit on the south—"

"North side!" Grandpa says and adds some very bitter words about Disagree's ancestors.

"South side!" Disagree roars, jumping up and down.

"I've knowed Disagree for a long time," Ton-thumb Tucker, the butcher, says, scowling fierce. "His memory is good."

"Ain't so good as Grandpa Groover's," Bing-bong Beemer says.

Ton-thumb eyes Bing-bong wrathful. "Yuh wouldn't be insinuatin' that I'm a liar, would yuh, Bing-bong?" And then Ton-thumb takes out a meat cleaver from under his apron and whacks a two-inch limb off a tree with one stroke. "I say south side, an' no mistake!"

Bing-bong picks up a thirty-pound rock like a baseball and returns Ton-thumb's wrathful glare.

"Take what I said anyway yuh want, yuh liver hasher," he says. "I say Grandpa Groover knows what he's talkin' about!"

Forty-rod Frye staggers up beside Ton-thumb and pulls a wicked looking jackknife from a pocket.

"Gents," he says, "I'm a-sidin' good ole Ton-thumb!"

Chin-nick Chancey moves close to Bing-bong and lets the sun glint on a razor he has in his hand.

"Boys," he says gritty, "I'll stick with Bing-bong any ole day in the week!"

"Now, gents," the senator bleats, "leave us be calm!"

But no one pays him no mind, and the next thing you know, all the Polecatters have took sides, including Jigger Joe and Judge Jackson, going over to Ton-thumb's side, and the Mayor and Nail-head Nutter on Bing-bong's side, leaving Boo Boo, Loud-mouth Blout and I, the thinker-uppers of the monument, in the middle of what looks like a second bloody battle of Coon Hill.

THE senator is no little pale. "Sheriff," he says trembly, "it is up to you to restore law and order."

But at that moment, Jigger Joe, who has a four-foot hickory club in his hand, makes a line in the ground with his toe. Being on Ton-thumb's side, he glares across at Bing-bong Beemer's men.

"If anybody wants to start somethin'," he says hopeful, "kindly set foot on this side of the line!"

"If yuh want to get yore brains knocked loose," No-work Norton says, "you set foot acrost the line yoreself!"

Then old Bundy steps up and says, "Fellow Polecatters, before you do any line crossing, don't forget who started all this trouble. None other than our fat-headed sheriff, Boo Boo Bounce!"

Everybody turns burning eyes in our direction, and Boo Boo, the senator and I decide it is a good time to wander back to Polecat, which we do, hurrying somewhat rapid.

The senator wipes the sweat off his white face and glares at Boo Boo no little unfriendly.

"You an' yore hobby!" he says harsh. "Now the voters're in a uproar and ready to revolt. It is circumstances like these, Boo Boo, that undermine our American way of life, thusly allowing some dark hoss to win a majority of the votes from us honest politicians."

"Like Friendly Frederick," I murmur sad.

"Esactly!" Loud-mouth clips. "Boo Boo, yuh're a idiot! Supporting you, I could lose the election myself. Goodbye!"

He slaps on his hat and stamps out, slamming the door so hard all the windows rattle.

"Boo Boo," I say faint, "maybe you should take up some other hobby. You could collect butterflies, or—"

Boo Boo grabs me, lifts me bodily from my chair and shakes me like a rat.

"Hopewell," he roars, "being a man of limited vocabulary, I cannot think of anything bad enough to call you!" He shoves me back into the chair and shakes a fist under my nose. "All I know is that you, and nobody else but, has got me into water very hot!"

"Boo Boo," I say, "I was merely trying to help you win—"

He stops me with a waggle of a fat finger.

"Hopewell, listen to my ultimatum. If by sundown today, yuh have failed to extricate me from said hot water, yuh can consider yoreself fired as of that moment, and no mistake!"

"But, Boo Boo," I protest, "it is now noon, leaving me only a half-day to—"

"Deputy," Boo Boo says deadly, "kindly step through yon front door and get busy extricating!"

I go outside. Although it is noon and time to go home to eat dinner, I am no hungrier than a dead duck, which is what I am, for I see no way to calm the troubled waters, and I wish I was elsewhere some million miles away. And who should I see walking along the street very confidential and chummy but old Bundy, Senator Loud-mouth Blout and Friendly Frederick.

They go into Stinky Joe's restaurant to eat, and I say to myself, "Hopewell, never before have you had worries like this. You should find a hobby to keep your mind off—"

Then it strikes me like a bolt out of the blue, how to cool the hot water Boo Boo is up to his neck in, and I am somewhat astounded that a thinker-upper such as I did not stumble upon this inspiration sooner.

I cast a wary eye around and about. All is quiet. Utmostly nonchalant, I wander on to the Polecat News office and find the door is unlocked, which is no surprise, for no one would likely steal old Bundy's printing press. Presently I am walking down the street again, whistling trilly and thinking how nice indeed it is for a man to have a hobby to take his mind off his worries.

When I arrive home, my wife eyes me no little suspicious and says, "Hopewell, why are you late for dinner?"

"My dear," I say, "official business with a political flavor detained me."

"Speaking of politics," she says icy, "what is this I hear about Boo Boo stirring up a hornets' nest all over town?"

"Hornets' nest?" I murmur innocent.

"Sometimes I think working for Boo Boo is a bad influence on you. I have a

mind to get you a job punching cows on—"

"My dear," I say somewhat alarmed, "leave us not do nothing hasty. Kindly pass the fried potatoes."

"Hump!" she says, but passes the potatoes.

I eat rapid, put on my hat and hurry back uptown, where I stand about on the street. Presently I see Mayor Mince-meat Malone crossing toward his office, packing a sixgun, for he is running no chances of someone slugging him over the question of where the Battle of Coon Hill was fought.

HE sees me approach and scowls.

"Hopewell," he says, "if we ever needed a strong-armed sheriff an' deputy, now is the time. More and more people are gettin' het up over where the battle was fought. Wouldn't surprise me but what there will be bloodshed before nightfall."

"Mayor," I say calm, "I have thought of a way to prove who is right about the location of the battleground. All we have to do is to gather a delegation of both sides, go out to Coon Hill and look for evidence of the battle."

"Evidence such as?"

"Indian weapons," I reply. "You can depend on it that wherever Indians fought a bloody battle, you'll find—"

"Hopewell," he says, smiling of a sudden, "you are a genius! Leave us go look—but the side that is wrong about this battleground business ain't goin' to be very happy."

"It is the only way," I say positive. "I will go explain to Boo Boo what we must do, while you gather up a few-odd citizens to go with us to look for battle evidence. Incidental, leave us omit old Bundy and Friendly Frederick, them being a no-little fly in Boo Boo's soup."

Mince-meat nods agreeable. "Since I cannot think of no better way to settle the argument, I will do as yuh suggest."

In the jail office, I find Boo Boo wide awake and twiddling his fat thumbs very nervous.

"Hopewell," he says, "I do not like the smell of things around and about Polecat. I notice numerous citizens packing hoglegs and casting baleful glances toward the jail office. It has occurred to me that I should ought to take a vacation, so kindly saddle my hoss an' sneak it out of town. I will meet—"

"Boo Boo," I say, smiling fatherly, "relax. I have a idea."

"Hopewell," he says, scowling fierce, "leave us have no more of yore ideas! I would sooner set on a keg of powder with a very short fuse burning as to take in a scheme of yourn."

I ignore this with a confident chuckle. Then I tell him how the mayor is gathering up a delegation, and we will go to Coon Hill to look for evidence of the battle.

A slow smile drives the worry from Boo Boo's face. "Hopewell," he says emotional, "I take back the nasty things I have said about you. Leave us shake hands and forget the past."

We hear a commotion outside and see the mayor and a number of citizens with shovels gathered in front of Nail-head's store.

"Them shovels," Boo Boo murmurs, "could do considerable bodily injury to one such as I who am not overly fast on his feet."

"No one is going to bang you with a shovel," I tell him. "Come, leave us go locate the battleground."

We step into the street and join the delegation, which I see is evenly divided between Grandpa Groover's side and old Disagree Dixon's. Also, Grandpa and Disagree are along, each eyeing the other no little distrustful. I am relieved to see that neither Mr. Bundy nor Friendly Frederick are present.

We go first to the north slope of Coon Hill, and Mayor Malone says, "Scatter out, gents, and leave us get busy."

At that moment, old man Juniper steps out from amongst the trees, whiskers and all, and says, "Hopewell, who's dead?"

"Nobody," I answer. "We are looking for evidence of the Battle of Coon Hill."

"Funny," he says. "Only t'other day, I saw a feller diggin', but he wasn't

lookin' for evidence. He was a-buryin'—"

"Deputy," Boo Boo mutters, "suppose they don't find no battle evidence, then what?"

"Leave us cross no bridge before we reach it," I say.

Pretty soon everybody stops digging, and the mayor says, "Well, gents, looks like we draw a blank here. Leave us step over to the south slope an' dig."

We trail over the hill to the south slope.

"Bet they won't find nothin' here, neither," old Juniper says.

Sure enough, he is right.

"This is a pretty how-de-do," the mayor says, wiping his thin, sweaty face. "Hopewell, now what do yuh say?"

"Leave us move around to the west slope and dig," I say cheerful. "Who knows, maybe Grandpa and Disagree are both wrong. After all, that battle was fought a long time ago."

Grandpa Groover and Disagree Dixon look kind of worried, but say nothing. Eyeing each other no little belligerent, the men shoulder their shovels, and we walk to the west slope.

"I am about fed up with this diggin' business," Bing-bong Beemer says.

Everybody nods agreement and gives me unfriendly glares, which I return with a pleasant smile.

"Gents," I say, "leave us remember that Rome was not built in a day."

At that moment, Nail-head Nutter lets out a yip. "Looky, I found a Injun arrowhead!"

"I found one, too," Ton-thumb pipes up.

"Me, too," says Chin-nick Chancey.

IN NO time at all, they have turned up numerous arrowheads and are smiling around and about, forgetting they are enemies.

"So both yuh ole coots was wrong," the mayor says severe to Grandpa and Disagree. "So the battle was fought half-way between the places where yuh said it was."

There is a moment's thoughtful silence. Then Bing-bong says apologetic, "Gents, looks like as if we kinda got hot under our collar for nothin'. I, for one, am willin' to shake hands an' forget our past disagreement."

"Me, too," says Ton-thumb.

What should happen whilst everybody is shaking hands but Mr. Bundy and Friendly Frederick came along, puffing very noisy from having run uphill.

"Just now heard what yuh fellers was up to," Bundy pants, "so come as quick as I could to save a lot of unnecessary work. As yuh know, I'm an authority on Indian relics and battles. There never was any battle on Coon Hill, an' I can prove it by the records. The battle between the Polecatter and the Indians was fought down by Skunk Creek, which is where I found my collection of arrowheads, an'—"

"But, Mr. Bundy," Mayor Malone says, "both Grandpa an' Disagree was in the battle, an'—"

"Yeah?" Mr. Bundy says nasty. "Them two ole goats was just shootin' off their mouths. I've checked up on when they moved to this country, an' it was a year after the battle. Ain't that so, Grandpa? How about it, Disagree?"

The old codgers hang their heads like they wished they was elsewhere some distance.

"Heh, heh," Disagree murmurs weak. "Mebbe we're gettin' a trifle childish, an' our memories ain't so good, eh, Grandpa?"

"Could be," Grandpa says unhappy. "Come to think of it, it was likely some other battle I fit in."

"But, Mr. Bundy," —and now, for the first time, I notice that Senator Loudmouth Blout is in our midst, speaking thusly— "the men have found some Indian arrowheads here."

"That's right," Boo Boo says. "We found evidence of—"

"Let me see them arrowheads," Bundy says. Then he lets out a wild bellow. "My collection of beautiful arrowheads! Somebody stole my collection an' buried 'em here! What dirty, low-down sidewinder stole my arrowheads?"

"I reckon that feller over there did it,"

old man Juniper says, pointing a finger. "Like I been tryin' to tell Hopewell, I see him around here the other day, buryin' somethin' a piece up the hill. Likely he buried these first, an'—"

We follow Juniper's pointing finger, and who should we see but Friendly Frederick himself, who at the moment is not looking so friendly, or having a thousand smiles.

"Grab the varmit!" Boo Boo roars, and some men do so.

"I ain't guilty!" Friendly Frederick says hoarse.

"He's tellin' the truth," Bundy says. "He couldn't have stole my arrowheads, because they were safe an' sound this morning in my window, and he's been with the senator and I from noon on!"

"That's right, Boo Boo," Loud-mouth says. "He's innocent."

"Turn him loose," Boo Boo says mournful, which the men do.

"Fine thing!" Frederick growls. "Accusin' a innocent man. No wonder everybody says Coyote County needs a new sheriff. Well, I must be on my way to inform the voters about—"

At that moment, a thought flashes through my mind no little startling.

"Before you leave, Mr. Frederick," I say, "leave us do some digging where Juniper saw you burying—"

At that percise instant, Friendly Frederick starts on his way elsewhere, but Bing-bong sticks the shovel handle between his legs and trips him up.

"I smell a very dead rat!" Boo Boo says explosive. "Bing-bong, kindly lend me yore shovel. Juniper, leave us show me where yuh saw my opponent with a thousand smiles, burying—"

"Right here," old Juniper says, pointing to the ground at his feet.

Boo Boo sinks the shovel in the ground, and what should he unearth but a gunnysack with numerous articles in it, including a pair of patched overalls, rubber boots, a padlock and a horseshoeing hammer.

"Ah, ha!" Boo Boo says dramatic. "So Friendly Frederick has been doing the snitching to stir up the voters against me!"

"Just a little joke, Sheriff," Frederick murmurs faint. "Ain't a dollar's worth of stuff amongst the whole lot."

Boo Boo bares his teeth vicious. "It ain't the value," he says. "It's the principle of the thing. I am going to lock yuh in jail very snug, Mr. Frederick, and no mistake!"

"Sheriff," the senator says, "politics has its dirty side, which is to be expected. As a man of experience, leave me say that for all concerned, includin' the good name of Coyote County and Polecat and the party, it might be better if we should let Friendly Frederick pack up and leave the country in the next hour or so."

"Senator," Friendly Frederick says hopeful, "them are wise words. Packing up will take me less than a hour."

BEFORE Boo Boo has time to make up his mind one way or the other, Friendly Frederick has disappeared amongst the trees.

Then Boo Boo turns to us and says, "Gents, now that I have brought all misunderstanding to a satisfactory conclusion, besides solving who has been stealing these odds and ends, I hope I may count on yore votes at the election."

"Boo Boo," Mayor Mince-meat Malone says, "Coyote County is fortunate indeed to have such a fine gentleman as you for sheriff!"

"Hurray for Boo Boo Bounce!" numerous citizens shout with vigor.

"Wait a minute!" old Bundy hollers. "Now about my arrowheads? Sheriff, I maintain there still is a thief loose in our—"

But he might as well have saved his breath, for everybody is too busy shaking Boo Boo's hand to pay attention to the supporter of Friendly Frederick, the man with a thousand smiles.

It is sometime later when Boo Boo and I are setting in the jail office, resting, that he says, "Deputy, now that I have no opposition in the election, I have nothing to worry about. Consequently, I will turn my hobby of building a monument over to the senator. Incidental, here is yore five-dollar bonus."

"Thank you," I say, taking the fiver and tucking it away very cozy in a pocket.

At that very moment, the door whams open, and old man Bundy rushes into the room, pointing a ink-stained finger at me. "Sheriff," he hollers, "there sets the gent who stole my arrowheads! Yore own deputy!"

"What?" Boo Boo gasps.

"Who else but him?" Bundy roars. "I have just finished putting two and two together. Who was it suggested locating the battleground by digging for battle evidence? Who was it led the way to the west slope of Coon Hill where my lovely arrowheads was found? I ask you, who—"

"Mr. Bundy," I cut in indignant, "do you have positive proof that it was I who stole your arrowheads?"

"No," he says, "but any dim-wit can see that you are—"

"Mr. Bundy," I say unruffled, "how would you like me to sue you for a million dollars or so for slander?"

"Now, looky here—"

"Yes, indeed," Boo Boo says fierce. "Maybe two million, and may I add that I would be utmostly happy to hold you in jail without bail until yore trial, if and when—"

"Oh shucks!" Bundy says exasperated, only he does not say shucks. "What's the use? I give up!" And with a very loud and ungentlemanly snort, he walks out, leaving us alone.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, smiling broad, "Mr. Bundy has raised a minor point concerning his arrowheads about which I do not care to investigate further. None-the-less, it occurs to me that I should give yuh another five-dollar bonus with grateful thanks for what yuh have did in my behalf. Only a smart man like you, Hopewell, would have buried them arrowheads exactly midway between the north and south slopes of Coon Hill."

"Thank you," I say modest, taking the second fiver and tucking it away with the first, thinking how nice it is to work for such a fine, understanding and generous gentleman as Boo Boo Bounce, who knows when it is best to leave good enough alone, and no mistake!

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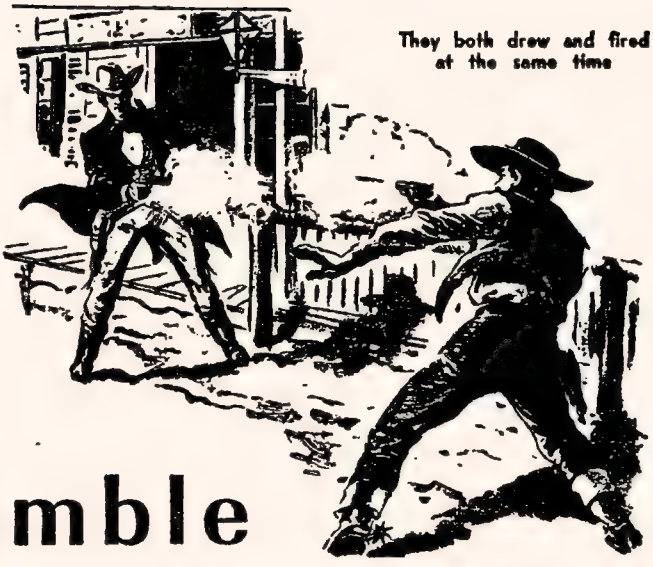
Parker Brookfield liked peace so much that he was willing to fight for it!



They both drew and fired at the same time

Gun Gamble

By CHARLES ALAN GREGORY

PARKER BROOKFIELD adjusted his dark frock coat as he stepped out of the Overland stage at Trail City. He brushed a spot of dust from his low cut flowered vest, and touched the flowing tie he wore at the collar of his white shirt. The six-gun he wore in a holster on his right hip was as much a part of him as were the gray trousers and highly polished black boots.

It was a dark, cloudy night. Faces were white blurs in the shadows as people milled about the stage station. Passengers were leaving the depot as the Overland prepared to continue its journey westward. The smell of sweating horse-flesh was strong as the old team was led away to be replaced by the new.

Brookfield walked away from the crowd, heading along the plank walk toward the hotel further down the main street of the town. There were three men standing on the plank walk ahead of him quietly talking. Big men dressed in range clothes. He passed them and suddenly stopped as he felt a gun-barrel pressed against the small of his back.

"Keep on walking," a heavy voice said.

There was a man on either side of him now and one behind him with the gun. Strangers that Brookfield had never seen before in his life. At least two of them were—he hadn't tried to get a good look at the man behind yet. He wondered if in some way they had learned about the five thousand dollars he carried in a moneybelt around his waist.

"The Mayor's welcoming committee no doubt," Brookfield said dryly. "I'm honored by the cordial reception, gentlemen. It isn't always that local citizens recognize a distinguished visitor at first glance."

As they walked on down the street Brookfield saw they were approaching the front of a brightly lighted saloon. There were quite a few people on the street. He no longer felt the gun-barrel against his back and had a hunch that the man behind him had placed his gun back into his holster. Four men walking down the street was nothing unusual—but if the one in the rear was covering the man in the middle with a gun passersby might get curious.

"We're glad you're pleased with your reception, Brookfield," the man behind

him said. "That makes it all much simpler."

The whole thing grew much clearer to Brookfield now. He had recognized the voice of the man behind him. Apparently Earl Whitmore was still a poor loser. Just three nights ago Brookfield had sat in a poker game for high stakes with Whitmore and two other men in a little cowtown fifty miles north of Trail City.

BROOKFIELD had never seen Whitmore before, but there was something about the tall man who wore his hair unusually long that made the professional gambler suspect Whitmore might be an outlaw. Apparently Whitmore had plenty of money at the time he had sat in the game, for he had been the one who was insistent they play for higher stakes.

The other two men in the game had finally dropped out leaving Brookfield and Whitmore playing against each other. It had ended with Brookfield winning the last hand and taking five thousand dollars from Earl Whitmore. Whitmore had grown angry over his loss and hinted that Brookfield was crooked. When the gambler demanded that he prove it Whitmore had backed down and sullenly left the saloon and the town.

Brookfield had made no secret of his intention to pay a visit to Trail City. He had talked about it long before he had started his journey westward on the stage. Whitmore might have had friends in the little cowtown to the north who informed him of the gambler's destination and so was waiting in Trail City for Parker Brookfield's arrival. At least that was the way it looked to the gambler.

"You kind of got the boss in trouble, Brookfield," said the man on the gambler's right. "Part of that money he lost to you in that card game in Beaver belonged to me and Fuller here. We were right mad when we learned what had happened."

"I don't feel good, even now," Fuller said as he walked on Brookfield's left. "Suppose this hombre no longer has the money with him."

"He still has it, all right," Whitmore said. "I've had a man watching him all of the time. He didn't spend any of the five thousand or even put it in a bank. Soon as we get to the alley on the other side of the saloon we'll get that money."

They reached the front of the saloon. Abruptly Brookfield went into action. He stamped down hard with his boot heel on Fuller's toes, then hit the man on his right a hard blow on the chin that sent him reeling out into the dusty street. Then the gambler whirled, covering the man behind him with his gun before Whitmore could draw.

Off to Brookfield's right Fuller stopped hopping about on one foot and snatched out his gun. As he raised the Colt to fire at the gambler, Brookfield shot him in the right arm. Out on the street the third man recovered from the blow Brookfield had hit him. He cursed and drew his gun. Brookfield fired at the man in the street. It was pure luck that the gambler's bullet hit the man's Colt and knocked the weapon out of his hand. Then Brookfield was again covering Whitmore with his gun.

"You sure have been right busy," said a small gray-haired man who had stepped out through the swinging doors of the saloon just as Brookfield went into action. He had stood there watching. "Too bad there were only three of them—five or six might have made it interesting."

"They intended to rob me as soon as they got me to the alley," said Brookfield. "I didn't like the idea."

"So I gathered," the little man said dryly. "Good thing you didn't get really mad about it. If you had you probably would have killed all three of them. Dan Mason is my name. If you don't mind me being curious—now you've got them what are you going to do with them?"

"Turn them over to the Law," Brookfield said.

Whitmore stood glaring at him. Fuller had dropped down on the edge of the plank walk and was sitting there moaning and holding his wounded arm. The third man stood in the street staring sullenly at his gun lying in the dust, not

daring to try and pick it up. A crowd was beginning to gather.

"I've got news for you," Mason said. "There isn't any Law in Trail City. Up until noon today there was a town marshal, but he quit. He just missed being drygulched four times and he got feeling a little uneasy. Then this morning, when somebody blew up his office with dynamite just before he opened the place up, he decided this town wasn't healthy so he resigned."

"All right, Whitmore," Brookfield said sternly. "Looks like I can't turn you over to the Law right now. So you and your men get out of town by morning and stay out. I mean it!"

"We'll leave when we get good and ready," Whitmore said as Brookfield dropped his gun back into the holster. He glanced at his two men. "Come on, Fuller, you, too, Harper. Let's go."

THE crowd drifted away as Whitmore and his men went on up the street without looking back. Harper had left his gun lying in the dust of the street. Brookfield found himself standing alone with Dan Mason.

"You wouldn't be interested in a good tonic to steady your nerves?" Mason asked with a grin. "Or maybe you'd like something for a upset stomach. He nodded to a store further down the street with a sign that read "Drugs" across the front of the doorway. "You see I'm the druggist in this town. Any time you need any medicine you just come to me, mister."

"Parker Brookfield is the name," the gambler said. "I don't need anything in the way of medicine right now, thanks." He frowned thoughtfully. "But why isn't there any Law in Trail City? I know you told me the marshal quit—but there must be more to it than that."

"There is more." Mason glanced around anxiously and lowered his voice. "There's no Law here because Glen Balwin wants it that way. He rules the roost around here—him and his gunmen. Heard that those three men you just tangled with were hired by Balwin yesterday."

"What's Balwin's reason for not wanting any Law here?" Brookfield asked softly.

"He owns the saloons, all three of them, and the hotel," Mason said. "This is a trail herd town. Last town you reach before you get to the railroad twenty miles east of here. Ranchers and trail herd bosses coming back from taking a herd to the railroad stop off at this place. They usually have the money they got for the herd with them but they don't have it when they leave if they get away alive."

"And nothing is being done about it?" Brookfield asked.

"Of course something is being done," the druggist said. "The local citizens decided they had enough of Balwin's rule so a week ago we wrote asking that a U. S. marshal be sent here to clean up the town. He hasn't arrived yet, but we're expecting him to show up soon."

A big, heavy-set man stepped out of the deep shadows at the corner of the saloon. Apparently he had been standing there listening for some time. He was dressed in store clothes and, if he wore a gun, it was not visible.

"Glen Balwin!" Mason said nervously.

"You talk too much, Mason," Balwin said coldly, as he walked toward the little druggist. "I want your drug store closed permanently by morning. Then you get out of town."

"But I can't do that, Mr. Balwin," Mason protested. "There are sick people in this town. Mrs. Gray and the others—she needs her heart medicine—and the others need medicines, too. I can't close. There isn't another drug store within a hundred miles!"

"That doesn't matter to me," Balwin said impatiently. "When I give an order I want it obeyed." He deliberately smashed a fist into Mason's face, and knocked the smaller man back against the wall of the saloon. "Remember that!"

"Why not try giving orders to someone your size, Balwin," Brookfield said angrily.

The town boss turned to the gambler as though seeing him for the first time.

"Who in blazes are you?" Balwin demanded angrily.

"Brookfield is the name," the gambler said. "I just arrived in town."

"And you are leaving right away," Balwin said. "We don't need you around here."

"Maybe you don't, but the town does," Brookfield said. "I'm giving you just two hours to take your whole wolf pack and get out of Trail City."

Mason leaned weakly against the side of the saloon dabbing at a cut lip with a white handkerchief. Balwin let out a roar of rage and lunged at Brookfield. A right to his body doubled him up, a left to his chin straightened him out. But he was hard and recovered quickly. He closed in, pounding at Brookfield with rights and lefts.

They were both big heavy men and they knew how to fight. They kept landing hard blows, and each man taking plenty of punishment. Balwin landed a hard right that sent Brookfield reeling back. He recovered and smashed a left to Balwin's jaw. The town boss went down, knocked out cold.

A CROWD had seen the fight start, and quickly gathered. It appeared to be made up mostly of local citizens of the town but Brookfield saw a few men who looked like gunmen at the fringe of the crowd. They were Balwin's men, watching and waiting to see what would happen next.

"There he is!" Mason said pointing to Glen Balwin lying unconscious on the plank walk. "There's the man who has had us scared of our shadows—the man who just ordered me to close my drug store for good!"

"Close the drug store!" shouted old Martin Gray, owner of the general store. "That would mean my wife wouldn't be able to get any more medicine for her heart, and without it she would die."

"Balwin has gone too far this time!" another man shouted. "Let's run him and his whole bunch out of town."

"If I had my way I'd lynch him and his whole bunch!" Gray shouted. "There's only about fifteen of those gunmen of his around, and there must be over a hundred of us local men. Let's clean them out!"

At the edges of the crowd men moved swiftly away to disappear into the shadows. Balwin's gunmen knew when it was wise to leave town quietly for good. They had no loyalty to their boss. He merely had paid them well. They felt their lives were worth more than the money. By morning they would be far away from Trail City.

Balwin regained consciousness and got to his feet. He glared around him. "All right, men," he shouted. "Clear this crowd away. Grab Brookfield! I'll show everyone I'm still boss here."

There was an angry roar from the crowd as they surged closer, but no gunmen made their way through. They had gone, leaving the town boss to take care of himself. Balwin's amazement was replaced by a look of fear, as he gazed around him, still calling anxiously for his men.

"Your men have quit you, Balwin," Mason said. "Left you like rats leaving a sinking ship. You're all through."

"Not quite," a voice called from down the street in front of the drug store. Earl Whitmore stood alone in the center of the street. "I'm still here. Parker Brookfield is a gambler. Let's see if he will play this hand out. If he downs me, you can do what you want with Balwin. If I kill Brookfield, then Balwin and I can leave town without being bothered, and I get the five thousand dollars Brookfield stole from me."

"You mean the five thousand that you and your two pards must have got from some bank robbery further north, and that you lost to me in a poker game," Brookfield called as he made his way through the crowd. "All right, Whitmore. I'm playing out the hand."

The crowd moved back out of the way. Mason, Gray and some other men grabbed Balwin and took him with them. Brookfield stepped out into the street. His gun was still in the holster as he walked toward the other man. Some distance down the street a stocky man on a roan halted his horse and sat in the

saddle watching as he realized what was going to happen.

"All right, Whitmore," Brookfield said. "Draw!"

They both drew and fired at the same time. Brookfield felt a searing pain as a bullet scraped his left side. Whitmore staggered as though rocked by a violent wind.

Then he pitched face downward in the dust, with Brookfield's bullet in his heart.

A moment later the crowd came rushing out, patting Brookfield on the back. The man on the roan rode up. There was a badge pinned on his vest. He looked around and grinned.

"Looks like I got here a little late," he said. "I'm Ed Pratt, U. S. Deputy Marshal."

"Funny," Mason said. "I thought Brookfield might be the marshal the way he started right in cleaning up the town. But Pratt can take care of Balwin. Place him under arrest. It is better that way."

"Much better," Brookfield said, and then he smiled. "I hope to stay around this town awhile and I like things quiet. I'll even fight to make sure they are that way!"

Gold Camp Bookkeeping

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The True Story of Merchant Joaquin de Lucca

•

By SAM BRANT

ONE of the picturesque non-prospectors of the California gold rush was Joaquin de Lucca. De Lucca, who was illiterate, built himself a small general store at Jimtown, and proceeded to do business with all comers.

Since there was little ready cash around, most business then had to be conducted on credit. That called for extensive bookkeeping, and de Lucca not only couldn't write letters but didn't know his numbers. He could add, though, and he had plenty of imagination and shrewdness. Fellow businessmen laughed when de Lucca bought himself a whole pile of big ledgers. De Lucca merely smiled.

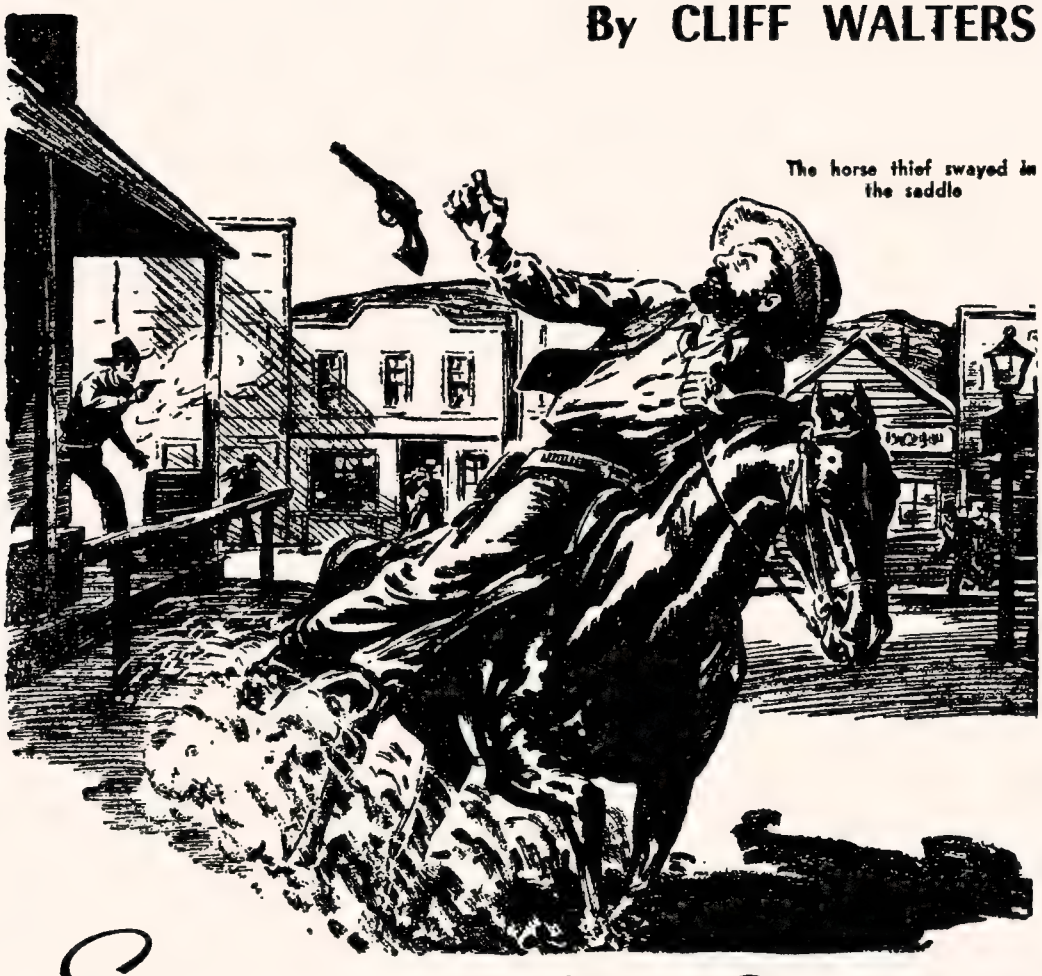
According to their needs, the little Italian assigned each customer a page or a series of consecutive pages in his ledgers. Every time a customer bought something on credit de Lucca drew a crude picture of the item on the customer's page and next to it the unpaid price in a simple but effective code of his own—a vertical line about an eighth of an inch tall represented five cents, a quarter inch line signified ten cents and crosses served to indicate dollars.

When de Lucca wanted to show that someone owed him for a cheese, he drew a circle; a wedge meant only a pound of cheese; ink dots represented salt, and pencil dots indicated sugar; a steaming teacup in ink meant coffee, the same in pencil stood for tea. De Lucca became famous for the accuracy and honesty of his accounts.

But when partners Horace Cross and Sylvester Pitts showed up one day to settle their bill, hot words were exchanged. De Lucca, pointing to a circle, demanded payment for a whole cheese. The partners denied they had ever bought a cheese. In fact, neither one liked cheese. De Lucca insisted. So did the partners. A fight, perhaps with knives or guns, was only seconds off when Cross suddenly exclaimed, "Hey, we never bought any cheese but we did buy a grindstone!"

De Lucca blushed redder than the reddest shirt in his store. "Gentlemen," he apologized, "forgive me. I was stupid. I forgot to draw the little hole in the big circle to show it was a grindstone and not a cheese. No charge for the grindstone, please!"

By CLIFF WALTERS



The horse thief swayed in the saddle

Sixes on the Summit

NO DARK CLOUD of the trouble storm in the offing had appeared above the hill-rugged horizon bounding Ringville when Dave Chariton rode into the little range town. Ringville was quiet, unusually lethargic this June morning. No horse stood tied at the racks on the block-long street, not until Dave, tall, rawboned and turned the color of leather by the Wyoming sun, tied his rangy sorrel in front of old Andy Farrell's general store. A pack burro was being tethered to the same rack by a small, black-bearded stranger who limped badly in his worn-out boots.

Dave glanced from the pick, shovel and gold pan atop the burro's pack to the bearded man. "How goes the nugget chasin', mister?" Dave asked.

"Ugh!" grunted the other in a tone

When two hellions repay good with evil, fast-shooting Dave Chariton settles an old score—via powdersmoke!

of disgust. "A prospector on this no-good range is lucky to make ten cents in a long day." He pulled a little tobacco sack from the pocket of his greasy overalls. "Where can I swap a pinch of pay dirt for money?" he wanted to know.

Dave nodded his rusty-colored head at the log building two doors from the store.

"Bert McNair in the bank'll fix you up. Or maybe old Andy Farrell, right there in the store."

"Ugh!" grunted the dour stranger. With beady, black eyes he sized Dave's top horse up, then limped slowly toward the bank.

Entering the store, Dave spoke to the plump, elderly proprietor. "Mornin', Andy. Business crowdin' you pretty hard?"

"Yep. Ain't been two hours since I sold a spool of thread. Looks like I'll have to hire some clerks. Want to sell that little cow spread of yours out at Wolf Springs and turn counter-jumper?"

"Nope. Don't think I could wrassle a whole spool of thread around all alone. Heard any word from that new six-gun I ordered?"

"Yep. It come in with some other stuff on the stage last night. And here it is—belt and all."

Dave looked approvingly at the new weapon that Andy had laid on the counter. Dave picked it up, twirled the cylinder and sighted it at the saloon across the street.

"Hefts pretty good," he said. "Let me buckle that belt around me and see how it fits. Yeah, and give me a box of shells, Andy. And then, if you'll write the whole amount down on your books till I sell my steers next fall—"

"Sure," said the storekeeper, proffering the cartridges. "But don't leave this gun and belt hangin' on your corral fence for some light-fingered range tramp to harvest."

"I won't!" Dave declared flatly. "I sure hated havin' the other gun stole. It belonged to Dad, as I told you. It was a keepsake as well as a darned good gun." Dave slipped five shells in the cylinder of the new forty-five, then slid the weapon up and down in the new, stiff holster.

"I s'pose you can't wait till you try it out now," Andy Farrell said, grinning. "Well, that's a young buck for you."

DAVE was in the rear of the store, tying a fancy knot in the end of the new lariat he had bought when storm clouds hove over the horizon of Ringville.

He heard a snort out at the hitching rack and glanced in that direction just in time to see a dark-bearded man—no longer hampered by a limp—leaping to the back of Dave's sorrel.

"Hey! What the—"

Dave blurted those surprised words, then dropped the new rope and ran toward the front door. Already the fleet sorrel was bounding away and under the urging of the bearded man who now held a six-shooter in his hand.

"Come back here with that horse!" Dave bellowed.

The horse thief answered that command by turning in the saddle and blasting a quick shot at the tall man on the store porch. Lead ripped slivers off the porch support beside which Dave stood.

Then a new gun was leaping from Dave's holster. The first shot from that gun went a little high. Perhaps because Dave was so afraid of putting a bullet into the best horse he had ever owned. The next shot, however, hit the mark, as Dave heard another bullet screaming above his own head.

The horse thief swayed in the saddle. The high-lifed sorrel jumped away from his sagging burden. A rider tumbled, plummeted down into the swirling dust that rose from the street.

Gun ready, Dave ran toward the fallen rider, and saw that Ringville had suddenly come alive. Doors were banging open. People were yelling and running. But Dave let nothing distract his attention. He had barely been missed by two quick bullets. He didn't want a third one to catch him off guard and send him toppling into the dust.

Dazed by the bullet that had torn deeply through his right shoulder, and the jarring impact of his fall, the bearded man with beady black eyes and small, but beaklike nose, stared up at Dave.

"You wasn't wearin' no gun when you went in that store!" he growled.

"Is that why you thought you'd get away with my horse?" Dave countered, then turned to see Bert McNair, the banker, crawling on hands and knees out of the door of his bank.

McNair's bald head was bleeding.

"Stop that thief! Stop him!" he was saying. "He stole six thousand dollars from me. It was money I was counting when—"

"Dave Chariton stopped him, Bert!" bellowed old Andy Farrell.

Soon the banker, who had been felled by a blow over the head with a bank robber's gun, was on his feet, and had possessed the money plucked from the wounded thief who was now ringed by gawking spectators.

It was beefy, red-faced Tom Lathrop, the saloonkeeper, who interrupted other talk to yell, "Prospector, eh? Why, I know him now under that mask of whiskers! He's Crow Cateen!"

Crow Cateen! That name was one to conjure with! Crow Cateen, the badman—the gunster of notorious reputation.

"Yeah—Crow Cateen," snarled the wounded man who lay there in the reddening dust. "And lettin' some dumb range hand, like this long-geared cowpuncher, get the best of me. And when, it looked like, the cards was stacked for a quick deal! The big hero I suppose. He can brag now that he out-shot Crow Cateen!"

"No braggin', Mr. Cateen," Dave drawled. "It's a lot harder to shoot straight from the back of a gallopin' horse than it is standin' flat-footed on a store porch like I was."

"You're right!" the outlaw snapped viciously. "If we ever gun-clash again, mister, maybe I'll be standin' on the ground and you'll be layin' on it. Like I am now!"

"Wave a white flag, Cateen!" said Lathrop, the saloonkeeper. "It ain't goin' to do you no good now. You tried to rob a bank, and got crossed up. Now the state'll be glad to steel-cage a crow they've been huntin' ever since he busted jail down at Mound City!"

Old Doc Cartwright administered to Crow Cateen, and banker Bert McNair who had suffered a severe blow on the head. Then a sheepman rode into Ringville which was now agog with excitement. The flockmaster, gangling Adam Shull, said that he was on the trail of a stolen burro, one of a half-dozen he used up on his mountain range to pack salt in the rough country.

"I'm glad that new gun of yourn shoots so straight, Dave," said the sheepman, after he had learned the news. "It was lucky for Banker McNair that you had a six-shooter stolen, and strapped on a new one today!"

"That stolen gun of mine has turned up in none of your three sheep camps, has it?" Dave asked.

"You think one of my men stole it?" Shull inquired bluntly.

"They're always travelin' past my place at Wolf Springs," Dave said. "I thought maybe one of 'em—"

"Sure!" said the sheepman. "It's bound to be some sheeper that done the stealin'. No cowboy would ever take anything that didn't belong to him!"

"One of your herders, Blink Garhue—the gent you got paroled to you—ain't none too honest, Shull," put in Andy Farrel, storekeeper.

"What are you bellyachin' about?" Shull demanded. "You got to sell another gun to Chariton, didn't you?"

McNair, the banker, was grateful to Dave. If there was anything the bank could do—

"You can renew my thousand dollar loan next week," Dave said, grinning. "Yeah, and maybe hike the ante—but only if you think it's good business, and not just a reward. I could handle quite a few more cattle. The range is good out at Wolf Springs."

THAT had happened a year ago. Now another June had rolled around, and Dave Chariton was in Ringville again. Not to buy a new six-shooter, but to renew the three thousand dollar loan from the Stockman's Bank.

When he entered the bank and stated his business, Bert McNair shook his bald head—a head that now bore the scar left by Crow Cateen's gun-barrel. You'll have to talk to Adam Shull, Dave," the banker said. "He bought your paper from the bank."

"He did?" Dave's tall frame stiffened a little. "Why? Has he still got his heart set on grabbin' Wolf Springs and all the good range around it? And is this a play to get it?"

"Unless you have some awful bad luck, I don't see why you'll lose the place to anybody, Dave," answered the banker. "Oh, I didn't want to sell your note to Shull, but he's a stockholder and a director of this bank now, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Dave answered flatly. "My memory ain't as short as some folks'."

"Sorry, Dave. I know you saved six thousand cash for me one day. But Shull's goin' to renew your loan. I know that, too. Oh, he charges two percent more interest than the bank does, but—"

"That's fine," Dave said. "I wouldn't want to see Adam Shull lose anything. And he won't. Not if he can raise interest rates, and go into competition with the bank he's a director in. Also to have slaves, like Blink Garhue, paroled to him!"

Dave rode on over to the county seat, Redcliff, and tried to borrow money at the bank there. But cattle were going down a little now and the banker said that he wasn't taking on any new loans at present. He had to keep a certain amount of money in reserve.

Dave tried other places, but to no avail. He had to renew his loan with Adam Shull who smiled as he wrote in the new rate of interest and said, "You wouldn't want to sell your little outfit to me?"

"No!" Dave snapped. "And when fall comes, I'll be able to sell enough cattle to clean up my loan, whether they're high or low!"

DAVE was cooking dinner in his cabin at Wolf Springs the day Adam Shull, accompanied by a hand-tied prisoner, rode up. Dave stood in the doorway and looked at the prisoner. It was none other than Blink Garhue, a husky, unclean, shaggy man who, because of a nervous disorder, kept blinking his pale blue eyes.

"Now what?" Dave said.

"This no-good coyote's goin' back to the pen I was crazy enough to get him paroled out of," Shull said, nodding at his silent prisoner. "He got in a fight with Sam Thorne, my camptender, 'cause he didn't like the grub Sam was haulin' out to him! He hit Sam over the head with a neckyoke off the sheep wagon. Killed him!"

"Killed him?" Dave echoed. "Good gosh, Blink! Now you are in for it!"

"I know," mumbled the prisoner darkly. "But Sam started the fight. He called me a dirty jailbird, and other names!"

"Well, you are a jailbird, ain't you?" Shull cut in. "Yeah! And now you're goin' back—to stay!"

"Them spuds you're fryin' smell good, Dave," said Blink. "I'm awful hungry, Shull. Couldn't we—"

"Stable your horses and eat with me," Dave invited, sorry for the pale-eyed man.

"Well, all right," Shull said, grudgingly. "But we can't stay long. I've got to take Garhue over to Redcliff and turn him over to the sheriff. You haven't seen the sheriff around this range, have you, Chariton?"

"Yesterday he rode by," Dave answered.

"Did he say anything about—" Shull stopped.

"About what?" Dave prompted.

But Shull and his prisoner were already riding toward the barn down by the spring. Dave started peeling more spuds.

Shull untied Blink Garhue's hands long enough for the prisoner to eat. Then Shull tied them up again and ordered Dave to watch the prisoner until Shull could get the horses from the barn.

When the sheepman was beyond hearing distance, Blink Garhue looked at Dave and said, "Keep your mouth shut, Dave, and listen to me! You done me a big favor once. Pulled me and my down horse out of a gulch and kept me from freezin' to death. Listen. Me and Sam Thorne wasn't fightin' about grub, like Shull thinks. I found the Lost Vein mine when I was herdin' sheep up on the head of Summit Crick. And Sam, the camptender, knowed it. He made a play to doublecross me, get to town and file on that mine. I stopped him with a neckyoke!"

"Good golly!" Dave blurted. "The Lost Vein—"

"Shut up! There ain't much time!" said Garhue, glancing uneasily toward the barn. "You know that range up there, Dave. I'll tell you right where to find what I found—and lost! Then, if you can work that mine or sell it for a good chunk of money, you can hire me a good lawyer. Get one of the best and maybe—"

"Sure, Blink!" Dave said tensely. "But I always thought the old Lost Vein mine was north of Summit Crick about five miles?"

"I found it, I tell you!" Blink snapped. "But keep your mouth shut about it and I'll tell you where it is—'fore Shull takes me away!"

"Go ahead," Dave told him.

IT WAS a fifteen-mile ride, and a steep one, from Wolf Springs to the summit of the Campfire Mountains, a low but rugged spur of the Rockies. Dave, astride his sorrel and leading a leggy bay pack horse, had lost no time in reaching his goal. But he hadn't ridden the Summit Creek trail, the shortest route to his destination. He had followed a rougher coarse a mile to the south.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when, winding his way among the rocky ramparts of the high range, he came to the little, granite-cupped lake where Summit Creek headed. There he left his horses and made his way afoot down the noisy, fast-falling little stream. But Dave's alert gray eyes weren't on the ground, like those of a man seeking gold. They watched ahead.

Dave had put nearly a quarter of a mile behind him when he sighted a movement on the slope to the west of the creek. He saw a man, only a short distance away, who, kneeling on the ground, gazed steadily at the trail below. A trail that wound through the clearings in the scrubby timber.

Keeping almost as still as a statue, Dave felt little needles pricking at his spine. He made no movement, no sound. Then, as he wondered what to do, the other man twisted around on his knees, glanced upstream, and saw Dave.

The slim, dark-bearded man remained motionless for a split second. Then, hand whipping down to the gun at his hip, he came to his feet. Two guns were leaping from leather. And two shots, fired almost simultaneously, were waking this tranquil range with reverberating echoes that bounced harshly against stone slopes.

A bullet tore its way between Dave's left arm and his ribs, taking hide off the latter. Another bullet winged four feet above his head. A wild shot, that last one of Crow Cateen's. Wild because Dave's first bullet had ripped through the dark man's chest.

Cateen went down, but tried to whip his gun up for a third shot. Dave beat him to it. Lead that leaped from his gun put another hole in Cateen. And now the latter was more helpless than the day he had been bullet-bowled out of a saddle in Ringville.

Dave didn't run toward a fallen Cateen this time. He moved forward leisurely, ready to pump more lead into his enemy, if necessary. But Cateen made no move. He lay on his back, his beady eyes staring, transfixed, up at the sky where white clouds rode the summit wind.

Dave Chariton stooped and unbuckled the dead man's cartridge belt. Then he picked up a fallen gun and, with an old bandanna plucked from Crow Cateen's pocket, wiped it dry. The high range was still again. Very still. A rigid-winged eagle circled over Summit Creek. . . .

It was nine o'clock that night when Dave Chariton walked leisurely into the Ringville saloon. He glanced at a half-dozen men playing poker, then moved to the bar and ordered a drink. He seemed not to see two other men standing at the end of that bar. They were gangling Adam Shull and husky, shaggy-haired Blink Garhue.

It was the bartender who finally spoke. "What are you and Blink gawkin' at, Shull?" he asked. "Why are you grippin' your glasses like you was chokin' snakes? This ain't a ghost that just walked in. It's Dave Chariton—remember?"

"They are sort of gawkin', ain't they, Pete?" Dave said. "And here I'm the one should be gawkin', Shull. I thought you'd have Blink behind jail bars by this time. What's the matter? Are you so wealth-crazy you've let Garhue bribe you with all that treasure he found in the Lost Vein Gold mine, into lettin' him escape jail? And after him murderin' your own camptender, Sam Thorne?"

"Sam Thorne—murdered?" blurted the bartender, while card players stopped their game to stare in wide-eyed amazement.

"You must be drunk!" Shull answered unsteadily. "Sam Thorne ain't dead. He's herdin' Blink's bunch of sheep while Blink and me come to town for a little celebration!"

"Oh!" Dave answered coldly. "Then I must've misunderstood you today when you and your prisoner here stopped in to have dinner with me at Wolf Springs."

"We didn't stop there for dinner!" Shull growled. "What's the long-geared fool talkin' about, Blink?"

"I don't know," Garhue gulped.

"I do!" said a cryptic voice from the doorway.

ALL EYES except Dave's turned in that direction. Old Charley Baird, a lean, gray man with a star on his vest, was framed in that lamplit door. Now he moved toward Shull and Garhue. "I've been out huntin' Crow Cateen for a week, Shull," the lawman said. "Could you tell me where he is?"

"How should I know where Cateen is?" the sheepman countered. "All I heard was he escaped from a convict road-buildin' gang."

"Did you hear about that escape? Or was you and Garhue in on the deal, furnishin' Cateen with a horse, the same as you furnished him with a pack burro to play prospector here in Ringville, about a year ago?"

Shull's mouth twitched. Garhue's dropped open. It was Shull who said, "I don't know nothin' about Cateen, Sheriff! I swear that—"

"You know all about him—except one thing," the officer clicked. "And Dave Chariton'll tell you that."

"What?" Blink Garhue blurted.

"Cateen's dead," Dave said. "He come to town face down, on a pack horse. Don't look so surprised and disappointed, Shull—even if you figgered it would be me that would come to town that way. Yeah, I walked into your trap at Summit Crick. But I didn't ride up the main trail, like you and Garhue, the ingrate, thought I would. And long before I got there I saw your camptender, Sam Thorne, herdin' Blink's bunch of sheep."

"You and Baird killed Cateen?" Shull gulped.

"I wasn't there," Baird answered. "I didn't know anything about the deal till Dave found me eatin' supper at his cabin tonight, when he come trailin' in with the carcass of the coyote I'd been huntin'. It was a pretty lowdown trick you played, or tried to, Shull. Stakin' Cateen to the six-gun that had belonged to Dave's dad. The gun you stole off a corral fence at Wolf Springs!"

Shull stared at that old gun now, the one swung at Dave's right hip. Shull saw Dave's fingers moving along the belt, getting nearer and nearer to that gun. There was a hard, agatelike glint in Dave's gray eyes. Terror was a fast-rising tide in Shull's heart.

Shull began to blurt words out. He admitted that he had wanted Wolf Springs and that he had wanted Dave disposed of. He admitted that he had helped Crow Cateen escape from the convict road camp a hundred miles away. But he had been forced to do so, he claimed.

Shull and Cateen—his cousin, it turned out—had been in on a crooked deal together a long time ago, and Cateen was threatening to talk. Threatening as he had the day he had forced Shull to stake him to a burro, the day of the thwarted bank robbery.

At the conclusion of that wretched confession, Sheriff Baird said, "Dave struck it pretty rich today, anyhow, Shull. There's a five hundred reward on Cateen, one that you'll have to pay to Dave. . . ."

It was late when Dave lighted the lamp in his cabin at Wolf Springs that night. He should have been dog-tired after the events of the day, but he wasn't. He smiled as he took a half-dozen pieces of heavy rock from his pocket. Rock that Crow Cateen had broken off a barely-exposed vein of quartz today as he knelt at his task.

Dave would be going up to Summit Creek again in the morning, up to the mining claims he had staked there today. Not claims on the Lost Vein mine—which was probably only a legend. These were claims on the vein of rich ore that Crow Cateen had discovered while waiting to spring a death trap.

Dave hadn't told anyone about his find, riches won by fast-triggered lead. But Adam Shull and Blink Garhue would hear about it some day. And, Dave wouldn't blame them much if, in the frenzy of their rage, they grabbed and tried to twist the steel bars behind which they were caged.

●

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COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

① WHAT WAS MEANT BY "TAILING" A STEER?

② IN THE EARLY DAYS HOW DID RAILROAD DINING CARS GET FRESH MEAT?

③ WHAT WAS THE DUTY OF THE "NURSE" ON A TRAIL DRIVE?

④ WHAT WAS A "BLUE WHISTLER"?

⑤ WHAT HAPPENED TO JACK McCALL, KILLER OF WILD BILL HICKOK?

The answers are on Page 157—if you MUST look!

A man can win a fight and yet lose it—but Billy Queen won a battle he thought he lost!

by **TOM REGAN**

Billy Queen raised his gun and fired two shots

The GUN that was the LAW

AFTER the glare and excitement of the high-powered gambling halls and saloons, the little cafe on the side street was a haven to the three pilgrims. The place was dim-lit and cool, and the counter had a scrubbed look. The girl behind the counter was darkly pretty.

The fourth member of the party was no pilgrim. His name was Billy Queen, and he was the Law in this copper camp of Lode. He was small, compactly-made, and competent-looking.

The pilgrims were his guests, and had seen the sights. Now it was well past midnight, and they were tired.

"Good evening, Edie," Billy Queen

said to the waitress. "Let me introduce three friends: Mr. Mordecai Benton, president of the Mountain Central Railroad, Miss Lucinda Benton, his daughter, and Mr. Austin Lockridge, superintendent on this stretch of the railroad. This is Miss Edith O'Kelly Montez, an uncommonly level-headed mixture of Irish and Spanish, who also happens to be a fine cook. She brews the best coffee this side of New Orleans."

Edie Montez acknowledge the introductions. "Mr. Lockridge and I have met before," she observed.

Amusement flickered in Billy Queen's eyes as he listened to Lockridge's smooth explanation to Lucinda Benton.

"Yes, my dear, Queen is right. Edie can do more and better things to a pot of beans than Boston ever thought of."

"All the comforts of home," Miss Benton retorted. She was tall, poised, secure in her position of wealth and power, radiantly blonde, easily the most beautiful woman Billy Queen had ever seen—but arrogant, and demanding, and spoiled. The man who married her would lead a dog's life.

"Coffee keeps me awake at night," Mordecai Benton growled.

"Edie keeps a bottle of 150 proof rum on hand," said Billy Queen. "There's nothing like a coffee royal to make you sleep like a baby."

"Father," Lucinda Benton warned, "the doctor said no alcohol."

The old man's gray mustache bristled as he glared at her. "Blast the doctor!"

Edie Montez smiled and brought a brown bottle from under the counter.

The bottle exploded in a shower of glass as a gun roared in the small room.

QUEEN vaulted the counter, slammed through the swinging kitchen door, and saw at once that he was too late. There was no one in sight but Sung Ho, Edie's Chinese cook, who stood at the big wood-burning range, unconcernedly stirring a cauldron of soup.

Wasting no time on him, Billy Queen picked up the Colt that lay on the floor just inside the swinging door, pocketed it, and went back to the dining room.

Edie Montez kept her hands steady as she drew coffee from the urn, but Billy saw fear in her face. He took over her job and proceeded to serve the customers.

Lucinda Benton wrinkled her nose at the hot java. "Thank you, kind sir. You are quick and handy—for so small a man."

"A pity we can't all be stout and handsome," he said, without visible resentment.

"A pity—but each of us may utilize his own peculiar talent to the utmost. Please see what you can do to remove the ground glass from my hair."

"Give Mr. Lockridge a chance," suggested Billy Queen.

"At the moment," Lucinda Benton said, "dear Austin seems nervous—almost ill."

Mordecai Benton strained coffee through his mustache, cursed as the hot brew burned his mouth, and moved in on the conversation.

"You'd be nervous, too," he rasped at his daughter. "The bullet actually nicked the tip of Lockridge's left ear. Which reminds me—who fired the shot?"

"Poor Austin," Lucinda murmured, and smiled at Edie Montez. "It was Mr. Queen who investigated—so bravely. I suggest we hear his report."

Billy Queen saw with distaste that Edie had returned the smile of the railroad heiress. Women, he reflected, were the devil.

"I merely utilized a peculiar talent," Billy said, "and found nothing."

"Accidents will happen," said Austin Lockridge. "This one almost happened to me." He was trying hard to conceal his shock, and almost succeeding.

Mordecai Benton pushed his cup away and got to his feet.

"Lockridge, you had better go to your hotel. I want a word with Queen. He'll walk with Lucinda and me down to the yards."

Lockridge caught a gleam of mockery in Lucinda Benton's eye, opened his mouth, closed it, and departed.

Old Mordecai puffed at a stogie as

they went through the quiet darkness of the lower end of town. His private car stood on the blind siding at the depot.

"Come in, Queen, if you've got a moment," he invited.

Taffeta rustled as Lucinda Benton stepped up to the observation platform of the car. She turned and curtsied.

"'Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly,'" she quoted.

"Young woman, go to bed," Mordecai ordered.

Inside the car, with a brandy at his elbow and a thin cheroot in his teeth, Billy Queen admired the elegance of his surroundings and listened to Benton.

"My daughter has a sharp tongue, and seems to have taken a dislike to you, Queen. I'm bound to admit she gets her own way too often, and it'll be a relief when she marries Lockridge and settles down. Very capable, that boy. He's been out here six months now. Give him another six months—"

Billy blew a perfect smoke-ring and watched it float upward. "Another six months in this camp and the skunk will be dead," he said gently.

"You don't mince words," Benton said, without animosity.

Billy Queen stirred. "What can you offer that might make me bashful about speaking my mind?"

"That's the point!" Benton said, gnawing at his mustache. "You know I've got a proposition, and it doesn't matter a snap! I like that."

"What's the job?" asked Queen.

"This railroad runs through the toughest thousand miles of country on God's green earth. It's my railroad and I need law to prosper. You have the reputation of being a ramrodding peace officer who knows the hootowl hide-outs and how to reach them. You're my law and I'm hiring you."

"Just like that."

Benton's jaw jutted out like gray granite. "Just like that. I'll pay more wages than you ever heard of."

"I lost forty thousand at faro the other night," Billy said. "Money doesn't interest me much."

"And now you're broke," said Benton, scornfully. "Come to work for me, and you can buy and sell a gambling joint like the Lulu Belle, up there in town, any day in the week."

Billy Queen grinned. "I already own the Lulu Belle."

"You what?" The old man took this news as a jolt, but would not be diverted from his objective. "All right, say you're well off. You're still a gun for hire, and this is your big chance. For instance, a month ago, in Dry Gulch, not over ten miles from where we sit, a lone, masked bandit stopped the Mountain Limited, killed the express messenger, and escaped with forty thousand in greenbacks."

BILLY puffed at his cigarro, found it had gone dead, and tossed it at the high-necked brass cuspidor. He got to his feet.

"The forty thousand *I* lost was in gold," he said, "but it's an interesting coincidence. You've kept mighty quiet about this alleged hold-up."

"The train was delayed less than ten minutes. No passengers suspected anything was wrong. But the engineer had plenty of chance to size the bandit up."

"I could beat the engineer's description," Queen said, sitting down again. "Even to the color of the eyes."

"This is as good as a poker game," said Mordecai Benton. "I only wish I had a bluffing hand."

Billy's mind raced back through the years to a boyhood in El Paso, to hot sunny days in the old border town when two runty youngsters played at robbing banks, and punching cows, and chasing Apaches. And there was a third child, a little girl in starched calico, with neat dark pigtails. Sometimes they burned her at the stake, but they could never make her afraid. It was all a long time ago, but Billy remembered as if it were yesterday, because one of those sawed-off school kids had been himself.

"I might see what I could do about getting back your greenbacks," Billy Queen said slowly, "but I expect you'd want more than that."

"I want the killer, dead or alive. A small man, my hoghead said—oh, about your size and general appearance."

Queen nodded. "You're all riled up, and I don't blame you. But—I don't want the job."

"I'm stepping on your toes," Mordecai Benton retorted. "I don't know how, quite, but I can find out, and when—"

"In the meantime, sir," Billy said evenly, "you know where you can go!"

Stepping out the door, he collided with a soft, vaguely yielding figure on the platform.

"I heard every word," Lucinda Benton said. "It is a bad policy to oppose my father, Mr. Queen."

She was only dimly visible in the shaded light from the car, but his senses reveled in the delicate aura of her perfume.

"You smell like a honky-tonk woman!" he said savagely, and kissed her.

She stepped away, laughing with entire good humor.

"And I'm treated like one! This is the raw frontier, and I love it! You fascinate me, Mr. Queen."

He tipped his hat formally. "I have no doubt I'm fascinating—for so small a man. My apology for liberties incompatible with your high station."

"I invited the liberties, as you well know," she said softly. "Good night, Mr. Queen—sweet dreams."

The gun he had picked up in the cafe hung heavy in his pocket as he walked up the hill in the darkness. He tried not to think of Lucinda Benton. She had overheard his estimate of Lockridge, yet it gave her no concern. Perhaps, in her rarefied social atmosphere, philanderings were anticipated and discounted. She had pride, Billy sensed, but she was a strange woman, hard-cased and flippant.

At any rate, she was none of his business. It was true that Austin Lockridge was reckless, slick, and a waster, but—let Mordecai Benton worry. Let Lucinda worry.

When he reached the restaurant, Edie was ready to lock up for the night and Austin Lockridge was with her. Billy scowled at both of them, and went back to the kitchen, where Sung Ho was banking the range fire.

Billy took the gun from his pocket and dropped it into the bubbling cauldron.

"You savvy Johnny? Bimeby you see Johnny again, mebbeso give him six-gun soup. You savvy?"

Sung Ho's leathery wrinkles stretched as he cackled in Cantonese glee. Then blankness swept across his face like a curtain.

"No savvy."

"You savvy plenty," Billy snorted.

Edie Montez had blown out all the lamps but one, which, turned low, she would leave as a night light. Lockridge held the door for her, but she waited until Billy Queen joined them.

"Austin will see me home," she said.

IGNORING the dismissal, Billy turned his attention to Lockridge.

"You've had a difficult day," he told the railroader, "and will find your bed at the hotel conveniently restful."

Austin Lockridge tucked the girl's arm into his. "Thanks, marshal, but I'll manage"

"You'll go to bed," Billy said.

Edie Montez stepped between them. "All right, Austin, do as he says. It's Billy's town and he can be rough. Don't let his size fool you."

"I'm handy with my fists," Lockridge asserted.

"No, no," Edie said quickly. "It wouldn't be like a college boxing match."

"No need for either of us to get peckish, Lockridge," Billy said. "Edie and I are friends of long standing. I want to talk to her on a matter that can't wait until morning."

Austin Lockridge yielded resentfully. "I understand. Evidently you have established a prior claim."

The words were a sneer, but Billy kept silent until the sound of Lockridge's footsteps had faded. He offered Edie Montez his arm.

"I regret this interference," he said,

"but I judged it necessary."

"What is the matter with you?" Edie asked wearily. "This is the first time you have tried to rule my private life. I won't tolerate it."

He had no immediate answer. They went through quiet lanes to the outskirts of the camp, and approached the small cabin which was Edie's dwelling. It seemed to Billy that she lagged as they drew nearer.

"I doubt whether you are much fooled by Austin Lockridge," he said. "Forget him. There is a more important issue between us."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Edie.

He found the latch-string and pushed her door gently inward. "After you, my dear.

"You can't come in," she said quickly.

"And I know why," he said. "You have a guest—and his name is Juan Montez."

She gasped and tried to push him from her doorway. "It's a lie! I haven't seen Johnny since—since they locked him up in the Yuma pen."

"But Juan Montez broke out of Yuma two months ago," Billy said gently. "He killed a man doing it. I thought he'd have the sense to lose himself in Mexico. A month ago he stopped the Limited and robbed the express car. He killed the messenger." Billy paused, then raised his voice slightly. "Juan Montez—little Johnny. *I know you are within.* Do not trouble to approach the door, but open your mouth and say howdy. *Como ca va, amigo!*"

There was a faint sound as of skin rubbing against dry leather, or of mice rustling. Edie Montez laughed shrilly.

"You think my brother Juan is totally a fool—that he would dare to come here?"

Billy Queen smiled grimly in the darkness. "He is a total fool."

Again mice rustled in the cabin, and a man laughed, musically.

"'Allo, Billy! Long time no see." The voice was like that of Edie Montez, low and pleasant, but with a strong trace of border Spanish accent. "I am *malo hombre,* no? I theenk maybe I 'ave gun aimed at Billy Queen. I pull treeger, eh? Maybe you e-scared, eh, Billy?"

"Maybe I'm not scared," Billy Queen said flatly. "You and Edie and I have helped each other in many a tight, but this is where the trail forks. It's time you quit dragging your sister through the mud."

Edie dug her fingers into the muscle of Billy's arm, whether in protest or agreement he did not know. Her little brother Johnny was unpredictable—he might shoot, or laugh, or both. She had good reason for the fear that was in her.

Johnny Montez chose to laugh. "*Si,* I ride alone, with a full money belt, and soon I am in South America, and you will see me never. But first, there is a situation here that cries for correction. Possibly you overlook the evil in Senor Lockridge, Billy."

"I miss very little, Juan," Billy said. "There have been a few times in the past when Edie needed a brother's protection. She always got help—from me, not from you. Now she doesn't want you around, Johnny. She has given you money, lied for you, sheltered you from the law, all these years. I'm sick of that kind of business, and so is Edie. Say it to him, Edith."

Her reply, when it came, was almost inaudible. "I cannot talk to Juan—in that way. He is my brother."

"Well, I'm your brother, too," Billy said roughly. "More than he ever was. Johnny, I speak to you for the last time as a friend. Clear out now, leaving the train robbery *dinero* with me, and I'll see that you get safe across the border. Tomorrow, if I catch you in town, I'm the Law in Lode, and I'll put you aboard the first train for Yuma with an Oregon boot on your leg."

JOHNNY MONTEZ could still laugh, but not without snarling. "You would send me back to Yuma? Hah! I would rather be dead. You weesh to take away my South America stake? I am big fool, but not that big. This game, we play it my way, no?"

"No," said Billy Queen. "You think it

over tonight, Johnny." He backed away from the door. Edie Montez followed a few steps in the dark.

"This is my fault," she confessed. "Juan scouted my house and spied on me. I—it was late—and Austin Lockridge was here. Juan has a crazy, romantic notion that family vengeance is in order."

"Next time Johnny won't miss. Half the dance-hall girls in town will weep at Lockridge's funeral."

She flared up in quick defense, "Austin can't help it if he has fine manners and is popular. It could be that you are a little jealous."

"Why, Edie," Billy said, shocked and embarrassed.

"Oh, not jealous of me!" Edie Montez said bitterly. "It takes someone grand, like the Benton woman, to draw *your* eye. And what about her? She thinks you're comical."

He was glad for the darkness. "That's right, she does—but I don't think so much of her, either." He paused, trying to express himself clearly, but without too much offense. "She's not like us, Edie—she's more like Lockridge."

"I like her," Edie said perversely. "But she'll never marry Austin Lockridge."

Billy Queen thought then, with an odd inverted satisfaction, that no woman ever believed anything except what she wanted to believe.

"Sure, he hankers to marry you," Billy said bluntly. "Let's assume he means it, in your case. You'll be a widow before you're wed, unless we figure some way to stop Johnny."

"I can no longer talk to Juan," she confessed. "Something happened to him in Yuma, Billy. I am—I am almost afraid of him."

He nodded soberly. "I know you are. I'll have to think of something. Come here, *querida*, and say good night."

She obeyed like a good child. He patted her shoulder, kissed her forehead, and departed.

In the early morning he went to Lockridge's hotel, but found his bird had flown.

Billy knew where to look next. After a swift walk through the camp, past slag piles and mountains of tailings gray and ugly in the early light, he laid hand on a bright, brass knob and entered Mordecai Benton's private car.

Breakfast was in progress, and Lockridge was a guest. Mordecai, ridiculously out of character in a purple robe that covered pink pajamas, raised shaggy eyebrows at Billy's intrusion, but Lucinda Benton looked pleased. Cool and fresh in lacy frills, she finished pouring a cup of coffee, passed it to Lockridge, and smiled at Billy Queen.

"The policeman returns to the scene of his triumph. Back for another conquest, Mr. Queen?"

Billy Queen stared at her briefly, then addressed her father. "The eastbound Limited is due in about an hour. When it pulls out, Lockridge will be on board."

For a moment, Mordecai Benton seemed stunned at the effrontery of the ultimatum. Then his pale eyes began to spark icily.

"It's too early in the morning for humor," he said.

Billy pushed his hat to the back of his head, and grinned. "Your charming daughter thinks I'm a regular clown. You got anything to say, Lockridge?"

"Only that you are drunk or crazy," Austin Lockridge said, dabbing at his lips with his napkin. "In any event, this intrusion is inexcusable. I propose to throw you out of here."

"It sounds good, the way you tell it," Billy acknowledged. He drew one glove from a pocket, slipped it on his left hand, and stepped toward the seated group. "Here—let me help you all I can."

Reaching across the table, Billy Queen grabbed an indiscriminate handful of coat lapels, cravat and snowy shirt, and heaved Lockridge out of his chair.

Cutlery, china and good food went by the board as Lockridge's feet skidded ruinously across Mordecai Benton's linen tablecloth. Once in motion, Lockridge's heft was easy to keep coming. Billy Queen used his hip as a fulcrum,

pivoted sharply, and watched Lockridge land heavily on the floor at the far end of the car.

The big young railroad man scrambled to his feet, unhurt, but robbed of dignity. Billy Queen, having played to rouse Lockridge to action, grinned thinly and set himself for the bull rush to follow.

Lockridge came in swinging. Billy jabbed with a right, slipped one of Lockridge's haymakers, and jolted home a left cross—with weight and power built in—flush to the jaw. Lockridge buckled at the knees, went to the floor and rolled over on his back.

GLANCING regretfully at the drum-taut leather stretched over his knuckles, Billy Queen bent over Lockridge. He had done his work too well. He straightened and turned as Lucinda Benton spoke.

"Evidently these David-and-Goliath performances are a specialty of yours, Mr. Queen. I don't see that they prove anything."

"This one," said Billy, "proves that habit can grow strong in a man. I knew, of course, that I could knock him out—I have fought in the prize ring—but my purpose was to batter him, mark him up, hurt him in face and body, and in pride as well, so that he would be glad to get out of this town and stay out." He shrugged and spread his hands. "Habit got the best of me. I have always disliked body contact in a fight, and I couldn't stand to have him get his hands on me. He'll come to in a minute, madder than ever, and I'll have my job still to do."

Lucinda kicked back her chair and rose, pale and outraged. At least, Billy Queen reflected with some small degree of satisfaction, he had shocked her out of her smug superiority.

"You actually think you can run Austin out?" she cried. "Why—it's incredible! And what is your reason?"

"I aim," Billy said mildly, "to save his worthless life."

"You shan't touch him."

Old Mordecai Benton stirred himself, ambled over to the mirrored sideboard, and came back carrying a silver water pitcher.

"Oh, let 'em fight," he said unexpectedly, and sloshed ice water in Lockridge's face. "But not in here. Out on the platform. Queen, you are due for a surprise."

Austin Lockridge moved, sputtered, and sat up, rubbing his bruised jaw. Billy grinned at him, then turned back to Benton.

"I'll cut him to pieces in less than fifteen minutes. It makes no difference that he's a heavyweight."

Lockridge, on his feet, tried to say something, but Benton cut him off.

"I don't doubt that you'll thrash him. I still say you'll be surprised. You're a wise head, Queen—a little too wise."

Billy stepped to the door, opened it, and looked out along the platform. He stood thus for a long moment, with his back to the Bentons and Lockridge. When he turned, his face had paled.

"All of you stay in this car," he said, with a quiet finality that carried its own conviction. "There will be gun-fire. Stay here."

Johnny Montez advanced along the wooden planks without haste, and Billy went to meet him.

When forty paces separated them, they stopped, as by common consent. Billy Queen knew with a mounting foreboding that only one course was possible. This was Juan, little Johnny, whom he knew too well, and who would not be dissuaded from his present purpose.

Yet there had to be one last try before the six-guns spoke.

"You have fetched the money and are on your way south," Billy Queen said flatly. "That's fine. Just lay it on the platform, and get gone."

White teeth flashed in Juan's face. He was small, smaller than Billy Queen, with the whipcord slimness of a jockey, with clever, brown hands competent to riff a poker deck, or coax music from a mandolin, or trigger a .45.

"Such funny jokes, this morning! I see one Chinaman, he make funny saying concerning soup, now I see you, I

must laugh, no? Very funny theeng, Billy, thees greenbacks—easy come, easy go, you *sabe?* I make bad luck in cantina at Juarez before I come here." He took a step, gracefully, carefully, then another, toward Billy. "I wish to resume my promenade."

Billy Queen held up a warning hand. "Traffic is congested. Better take a detour! This is a bad situation, Juan."

Then, all in an instant, they were in the deadly emotional grip of the showdown. Both men were crouching, tensed-up, waiting.

Johnny Montez drew first, and fired from a peculiar leaning stance, his gun arm held tightly in against his body, while his left hand fanned the hammer of the Colt.

With lead plucking at his garments, whisking the hat from his head, grazing his ribs, Billy Queen raised his gun and fired two shots into the wreath of smoke that limned Juan Montez.

He knew he had ended it, and sheathed his weapon and waited for the smoke to drift away. The fumes of burned black powder were acrid in his nostrils, and a sickness fastened itself on his soul.

Lockridge came from the car, to look, and Mordecai Benton and Lucinda, but Billy was hardly aware of their presence. The sun was well up by now, and shining brightly, but it could never warm again the quiet body of Johnny Montez. From far off floated the whistle of a locomotive as the Limited boomed along its right-of-way. Billy Queen shivered, dreading what he must do next.

The clear voice of Lucinda Benton lashed into his consciousness, with words that cut like the razor edge of a skinning knife.

"Another example of the professional touch, Mr. Queen?"

SHE dared to mock, even here, in the presence of death, and his pent-up resentment smouldered and quickened in his eyes, and he struck back.

"The name is not Queen," he said brutally. "It's *Quinn,* and see that you remember. I've been 'Queen' for more than thirty years, because a little boy with an Irish heart and a Spanish tongue said it that way, and it sounded right. He was my old-time friend, my sure-fire *amigo*—and I have just killed him."

Austin Lockridge stepped forward, and Billy measured him with a vicious eagerness. "If you packed a gun," said Billy, "I'd try you out. But there's still time to work you over with my hands. This is going to be a pleasure."

"Wait—" Lockridge began desperately, but Billy was walking into him, swinging with both fists in a wild flurry of action. Lockridge backed away, trying to cover up, making no attempt to fight back, but stumbled over the body of Juan Montez, and fell beside it.

Billy was waiting for him to get up when Edie Montez came hurrying along the walk. The Limited whistled again, much nearer, and then there was quiet as she viewed the corpse of her brother

"Why, Billy? Why?"

He wanted to tear his eyes away from the arid desolation he saw in hers, but could not. "Why?" he echoed dully. "I don't know why—now."

She knelt beside the body, touched the cold cheek, and her lips moved in prayer. She rose, seeming to wrap her mantle of self-control more closely about her, and held out a package securely wrapped in heavy paper.

"This is not mine," she said softly. "Juan—my little Johnny—gave it to me last night, and said it would make me safe and secure the rest of my days. But it was not his to give. I presume"—she tossed the bundle lightly, so that it fell at the feet of Mordecai Benton—"it is yours. I return it to you."

Lucinda Benton had begun to weep, and Edie Montez looked at her curiously, bowed to all of them, and went away.

Mordecai picked up the packet of money and made as if to pass it to his daughter, then to Lockridge, and finally to Billy Queen, but all of them shunned it.

"Well," old Benton said querulously, "it's not my fault."

Sombrely, Billy Queen waited until

Edie Montez had reached the end of the depot and disappeared, then went and bent over the body of her brother. But Austin Lockridge cried out incoherently, laid hands upon Billy and hurled him violently aside.

Lockridge hoisted the light body to his shoulder, and stood there defying them all.

"This is something *I* can do for her!" he said truculently. "I love that woman, and I'm her man—if she'll have me!"

"Whoa! Hold on," Billy said.

"Mind your own business, Mr. *Quinn!*" Lucinda Benton said sharply. She smiled at Lockridge: "She'll have you, Austin, and you're lucky. Move along now."

"I'm going," Lockridge said, and went.

OLD Mordecai hefted the packet of greenbacks from hand to hand, and took a dig at Billy Queen. "That's the surprise I promised you."

"He'll do," Billy admitted. "But it didn't turn out quite the way you planned. Now you're still in the market for a husband for your daughter."

"She doesn't seem too sad about it," Mordecai observed, and stumped off toward his car.

Three miles up Lode Canyon, a moving plume of smoke advertised the approach of the eastbound Limited. It would come and go, but Austin Lockridge would not be aboard it.

"I'll be shoving off," Billy Queen said. "Business uptown."

"Nonsense," said Lucinda. "I want you to stay here and talk to me."

He clenched his fists in frustration, realized that his left hand was still gloved, and peeled the glove off, feeling foolish.

"Lady, don't prod me further," he pleaded. "What in the world would we talk about?"

"I'll talk," she amended. "You'll listen. You are a high-minded little man, unaccustomed to defeat. You are spoiled and you are a bully, and some day you'll get your head blown off. You have come through two fights today, and lost one of them, and that was a good thing, because Austin Lockridge is basically sound. Edith Montez will keep him on a tight rein, which is what he needs, and they'll both be happy. It has turned out very well, and you are glad, because Edie has always imagined she was in love with you, and you were always aware of it, and regretful. You have felt guilty because you couldn't sincerely return her love."

SHE paused, breathless, and he looked at her suspiciously. But this was not hooraw, and what she said was true.

"But you think you lost the other fight, too," Lucinda continued, "and you are eating your heart out, and I can't bear to see it. It must be a hard thing to do—to kill a man—but I think your friend forced it. I don't know why, of course, but perhaps he was escaping from something."

Hope lightened Billy Queen's heart. Her insight was amazing, and if she were right, or if she were anywhere near right—

"Get on with it," he ordered gruffly. "Tell the rest of your crazy pipe dream."

"I'm coming to the best part now. Look here, Mr. Queen, you've got to admit you make a mistake once in a while. Did it ever occur to you that you might be wrong on—me?"

"You?"

"Me. You couldn't be wronger. I'm a rich man's daughter, but my father got his start as a shovel stiff on an extra gang, and I was born in a section house up in Montana."

Her eyes were like diamonds, her words an entreaty, but—

"Do I have to hear the story of your early poverty?" he asked stiffly.

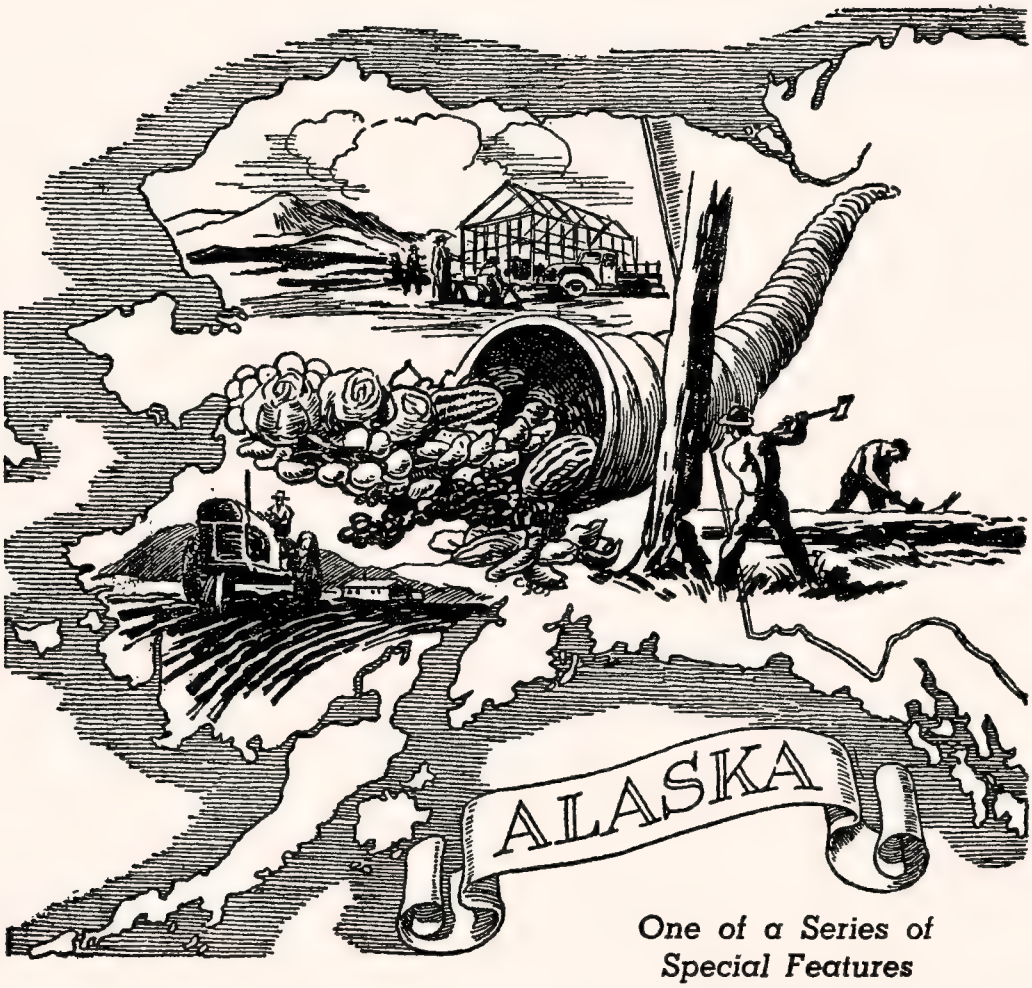
She recoiled. "I think not. Good day, Mr. *Quinn.*"

She turned away, and he knew he could not let her go. Maybe a dog's life wouldn't be so bad.

"Wait," he called, and overtook her, and held her tight by the hand and grinned. "We'll watch the train come in. And I thought I told you—the name is *Queen.*"

Homesteads in Alaska

By JOHN A. THOMPSON



One of a Series of Special Features

ALASKA is our last frontier—and our newest homeland. It may soon become the Forty-Ninth star in our national flag. The people have already voted for Statehood. Now it is only up to Washington to grant the rich Territory full inclusion in the Union as a member State.

When that happens, watch Alaska boom. It will be a new State in the rainbow glow of the Aurora Borealis. A state offering all the pioneer adventure of the early West in mining, industry and land settlement. Alaska will provide a further extension of our great American tradition of frontier land de-

Free Farms for Pioneers in a Land of Opportunity!

velopment. That is something we are experts at through native initiative, courage, and a long inheritance of pushing into untamed country and making it grow and prosper by our own efforts.

Already, and without even waiting for Statehood, many modern, pioneer-minded Americans filled with the same vision, spirit and sinew that urged an earlier generation to emigrate to the then new West have trekked Alaska-ward bent on casting their lot with the new empire that is just now in the making. They have faith in a country that is not, as too many still suppose, simply a land of perpetual snow and ice.

To those who know it, Alaska is one of the richest and most beautiful countries on earth. Its mines are fabulous, its mountains breath-taking in their grandeur. Its annual salmon pack has, and this may surprise you, a greater value in money than Wyoming's cattle, or Montana's rich copper output. The great green spruce and hemlock forests that blanket endless miles of mountain slope in southeastern Alaska afford one of the greatest untapped pulpwood resources left in the world.

Government Gives Farms Free

And Alaska's potential farm lands are in the very infancy of their development. So much so that Uncle Sam will still give—that's right, give, not sell—160 acres of good arable uncleared farm land in Alaska to such of his citizens as elect to clear and work it for their own use and ultimate prosperity. Moreover the prospective farm settler has approximately *32 million acres* of estimated homesteadable agricultural land to choose from.

Will the land produce? Is it worth anything once it is cleared and in cultivation? Those are perhaps the first things a business-minded prospective Alaska farm land pioneer would like to know because he is roughing it for future profit not simply for the sake of an outdoors country adventure.

The best answer to those questions is what farmers are asking, and getting, for tracts they settled on that are either wholly or partially developed. Here are some fairly recent figures. Partly cleared land on gravel highways within a 5 or 10 mile radius of the thriving, rapidly growing interior city of Fairbanks have been selling for about $50. an acre. That merely is the land itself. No improvements.

If there are improvements such as buildings on the land chances are the price may be $80. or more an acre.

Sure, fellows have gone to Alaska to homestead a farm and been disappointed and dismayed at the task they found confronting them. It is no cinch to clear off acres of birch and spruce and build a productive farm out of raw, untamed virgin land. Our forefathers discovered that in New England, in Ohio, in the Midwest and far West. But they took on rougher territory than Alaska—and in rougher times—and built out of it the greatest nation the world has ever seen. Moreover they did it without benefit of bulldozer, auto trucks and airplanes.

Alaska is no land for the softie. But agricultural Alaska is a land of definite opportunity for those who like or are willing to live somewhat lonely lives—at least at the start—in true pioneer surroundings, and will work hard to attain their ends. To these Alaska offers an endless wealth of untouched scenery, of mountains, forests and plains, of lakes and streams, of unsurpassed fishing and hunting country, and the possibility of an income beyond the hopes of the average farmer in the States.

So far three farming areas have been already started and are well on their way toward development in Alaska. These are the Matanuska Valley section in southeastern Alaska, the Homer area on the Kenai Peninsula, and the Tanana Valley region outside Fairbanks. There are in addition many localities where settlers have chosen to undertake small individual farming operations.

The Matanuska and Homer regions both lie in the "moderate" temperature zone of southern Alaska.

Winters there are hardly more severe, believe it or not, than in the Midwestern farm States.

Homer Soil Is Rich

To date the Homer area is somewhat less developed than either the Matanuska Valley or the Tanana agricultural sections. But the soil around Homer is rich and there is land in the district available for homesteading. Roads, however, are few. Transportation to Alaska city markets is still a problem.

On the other hand both Matanuska Valley and the Tanana homestead areas have excellent transportation facilities, both within the regions themselves and to various town and city markets in Alaska. The Alaska Railroad, with a main line running almost 500 miles between Seward and Fairbanks has a 19 mile branch line to Matanuska. The road cuts through the heart of the valley's farming region. There is also an auto road from Anchorage that pushes into the interior via Gulkana and connects with the Alaska Highway just south of Tanacross on the Tanana river.

Fairbanks, city center for the Tanana farm land region, is the northern terminus of both the Alaska Railroad and the Alaska Highway which more or less follows the Tanana river from Tanacross up to Fairbanks.

In almost any part of Alaska fishing and hunting, in season, afford pioneer settlers healthy relaxation and a usually welcome chance to reduce considerably their cost of living bill so far as foodstuffs are concerned. The larger streams supply salmon. Lakes and smaller rivers abound in trout, grayling and whitefish. Ducks and geese are plentiful in early fall. Ptarmigan, grouse and rabbits are year around residents. Caribou are often found in the Tanana Valley during the migration period. In some sections you may even get a moose. Good moose meat is oldtime sourdough camp fare, and grand eating too.

Berries are abundant during Alaska's summer months. Alaska home-made blueberry pie, blueberry rolls, or blueberry jam are items any outdoor hombre will smack his lips over. And the berries can be had for the gathering.

There is one thing the prospective agricultural land settler in Alaska should be warned about, if he has visions of a sod-busting enterprise similar to homesteading in the frontier days of the early West. Alaska has virtually no open "prairies" such as characterize the middle West. Practically every acre has to be cleared of at least some top growth before it can be put into cultivation. Present day use of bulldozers and heavy plows has eased this work somewhat, but land clearing is still a chore that the farm settler must face.

In return for the clearing he generally obtains sufficient timber from his own land for necessary building purposes, house or cabin, barns, shelters and so forth as well as wood for winter warmth —and all year cooking needs.

The Matanuska Valley farm homestead section is shut in on the north by the Talkeetna mountains. The Chugach range bounds the Valley on the east and south. To the west it is bounded by the vast level plain of the Susitna river. The Valley lies at the head of the Knik Arm of Cook Inlet roughly 125 miles as the crow flies from the open south coast of Alaska.

As in the rest of Alaska there is a great variation in the length of day between winter and summer. During midsummer the sun is actually below the horizon for only a few hours and there is no real darkness. Just a period of late twilight that soon emerges into early dawn. It's hard on early rising roosters, but they get used to it—and make up for their loss of sleep in the long winter nights that follow.

Grain can be ripened in the Matanuska farm country, as it can further in the interior. But in Matanuska winters are milder and the growing season longer than in central Alaska. Mountain ranges on three sides of the Valley protect the region against the fierce blizzards that rage down from the Arctic. Travel is almost always easy.

No Thunder Storms

Incidentally if the little woman is one of those gals who ducks in a closet during thunder storms, Matanuska Valley may be just the place for her. Even in

mid-summer the region is singularly free from severe electrical storms. Indeed, thunder, lightning and hail are almost unknown there.

Total annual precipitation averages from 13 to 18 inches, less than half of which falls as snow or rain during the winter months. Warm spells are fairly frequent during the winter often melting the snow away entirely.

Spring wheat, oats and barley are grain crops that do well in the Matanuska farm country. The average yield is about 22 bushels per acre for wheat, 36 bushels for oats and 25 bushels for barley. Grain is usually seeded about May 15th and harvested along about the beginning of September.

For hay crops Matanuska farmers lean to oats, peas and vetch. Oats and a variety of Canadian field peas are also grown for silage, both being dependable crops for this purpose.

Canning peas and potatoes do well as farm crops. Excellent strawberries are grown in the Valley. Red raspberries too produce splendid ready money cash crops annually. However fruit trees such as apple, plums and cherries though they have been extensively experimented with have so far given only decidedly negative results.

For the livestock minded in Matanuska Valley beef cattle production is likely to be profitable where a farm or ranch is situated close to adequate summer range. Winter feed is the main problem.

Dairying is already a successful, major farm industry in the Valley. An excellent market for whole milk, butter, cream, cottage cheese, and ice cream mix exists in the readily reachable towns and cities of southeastern Alaska. A local creamery has been set up at Palmer.

Hog growing is another profitable enterprise. So is poultry raising. In the poultry line White Leghorns, New Hampshire Reds and Rhode Island Reds take to Alaska like natives. And for the person who knows the ins and outs of the business, turkey raising might well prove a very profitable specialty. The dry spring weather that is characteristic of the Valley would be favorable to the young turkeys at a time when the poults are sensitive to wetness. Suitable feed can be raised for the growing animals. And in the fall, Anchorage and other local cities would provide a ready market for prime Alaska-raised birds.

The Tanana homestead farm region lies deep in central Alaska, across the rugged Alaska range and some 250 miles north of Matanuska. It covers that part of the Tanana Valley between Big Delta near the mouth of Goodpaster River and the confluence of the Tanana with the Yukon River.

To get a better idea of how big this agricultural region, is, and of how really big Alaska itself is, let's put it this way. The total length of this single potential Alaska farm area is 205 miles by air line, 317 miles by river. The maximum width of the valley is 70 miles. More than 7,000 square miles are included in the area which comprises some 4½ million acres of bottom or valley land, bench land and some terrace land. Naturally there are many acres not suitable for farming such as stream beds, lakes and swamps. But there are millions of acres that are farm land.

Most of the homesteading in this vast region has to date been restricted to a minor portion of the area extending more or less from Dunbar north about 10 miles, thence northeasterly to within a few miles of the Chatanika River, then southeasterly across the Little Chena River to a point near the junction of the Salcha and Tanana Rivers. The section then follows about 2 miles south of the left limit of the Tanana to its junction with the Chena and thence runs in a westerly line back to Dunbar.

Winters Are Very Cold

Just a drop in the bucket compared to the potential farm land acreage that is available for homesteading and settlement in the full Tanana Valley agricultural region.

Now an honest word about the climate of this part of Alaska. It is in the interior of the Territory and winters are cold. No mistake about it. No use trying to kid yourself on that score. The tem-

perature may drop to 60° below at Fairbanks. But that's exceptional.

Normal average winter temperatures range from 4° to 18° below zero in December and from 1° to 22° below zero in January. People live THERE? Sure they do. And think nothing of it.

As a matter of fact those cold winters, much like those of many parts of Scandanavia, are healthful and invigorating. The air is crisp, dry and clear. There is seldom any wind and as a result the average close to 60-inch annual snowfall remains evenly distributed over the ground most of the time. The snow is usually light and feathery.

At Fairbanks kids and teen-agers go to kindergarten, grade school, high school and college all through the winter term. Grown-ups and youngsters alike go to the church of their choice on Sundays. Stores and movies are open weekdays, and planes fly in and out of the Fairbanks airport all year round. Life runs its normal course.

As a matter of fact I have been colder, or at least felt colder, in a norther in the Texas Panhandle than I ever did in Alaska. And I have wintered in both places.

The frost-free growing period in the Tanana Valley runs from about May 20th to September 5th. June temperatures may run as high as 92 degrees, a record. Temperatures in the 80's and up to 85 are fairly common in June, July and August. And don't forget, during mid-summer sunset comes about 10.30 p.m. with daybreak just a few hours away.

For 19 out of the first 20 years it was raised there, spring wheat was grown successfully in the Tanana Valley farm land area. As down at Matanuska oats and barley are other successful grain crops. Alaska peas, maturing every season and yielding 20 to 25 bushels per acre are extensively grown for hog-feed.

And potatoes! Ever since gold placer mining operations began in the Tanana Valley and some prospector planted a few spuds beside his gold claim potatoes have been a staple, always marketable Valley crop. The market for Valley grown spuds is not just in the bigger mining cities such as Fairbanks but it extends to all the scattered mining camps on the various creeks and rivers for miles around, as well as to those camps on the Tanana and Yukon Rivers that are reached by river steamboats plying out of Nenana.

Hog and poultry production can be profitable. Dairying, however, is more or less confined—at present anyhow—to town dairies that supply Fairbanks and the bigger nearby mining camps with fresh milk and other dairy products.

Strawberries don't do as well in the Tanana. But wild blueberries are much more abundant and more or less take their place. Crates of them are often shipped from Fairbanks to the southern Alaska towns.

Vegetables Grow Well

Hardy vegetables such as cabbage, cauliflower, radishes, lettuce, beets, carrots, parsnips, turnips, beans, rutabagas and peas can also be grown in the Tanana Valley for home use or local market selling. Corn doesn't do so well. Nor do vegetables like tomatoes, cucumbers and melons unless—and here's an angle for the enterprising—they are raised in greenhouses or under the protection of coldframes.

How do you go about getting 160 acres of Alaska farm land, or further detailed information on the subject? For detailed information regarding southeastern Alaska (including the Matanuska region) write the District U.S. Land Office, Anchorage, Alaska. For data on the Tanana Valley region write the District U.S. Land Office, Fairbanks, Alaska, and the Alaska Agricultural Experiment Station, College, Alaska.

Generally speaking here, in summarized form, are the principal requirements under the homestead laws for acquiring a raw farm land 160 acre tract in Alaska:—

First—The land desired must be agricultural in character.

Second—Only a U.S. citizen or person who has formally declared his intention (first papers) to become a citizen of the U.S. can make a homestead entry. A former homestead outside Alaska, does not, however, bar the claimant's right to make entry in Alaska for a tract not exceeding 160 acres.

Third—The prospective homesteader must establish residence on the land of his choice within six months of taking up the homestead and must continue to live on it for at least seven months out of each year for three years, six months for four years, or five months for five years. Or he has this alternate choice. After fourteen months continuous residence he may commute further residence requirements and gain immediate possession by paying for the land at the rate of $1.25 per acre. War Veterans may apply their service record up to two years residence on their homestead claim but must put in the minimum of seven months continuous residence.

Fourth—One-sixteenth of the area included within the homestead must be cultivated within the first two years after taking up the homestead. This must be increased to one-eighth before the end of the third year. However, so that no undue hardship may be imposed on a settler the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to reduce this requirement under special circumstances if a satisfactory showing of the reasons for the homesteader's failure to comply with the law is made to him.

Fifth—A habitable house must be erected on the land.

Sixth—Proof of compliance with the regulations and application for final title must be submitted within five years from date of entry. Unless, of course, after fourteen months continuous residence the homesteader elects to commute his entry by paying $1.25 per acre.

At the time the homesteader makes his entry he has to pay the authorities a total entry fee of roughly $16 for a 160 acre tract. And about $11.00 if the tract is under 81 acres. When final proof of entry is submitted there are other fees, advertising notice in local newspaper, etc., that come to perhaps $25 or $30.

That's all. That, some stick-to-it-iveness, a lot of hard work and real pioneer adventure and the 160 acre farm in Alaska is yours.

One other question often asked is can the homesteader who elects to locate in Alaska find opportunities to earn enough during the time the law permits him to be absent from his homestead to support him until he can begin to market his own crops? The answer depends chiefly on the individual. Some fellows can find jobs anywhere, anytime. Others just haven't got that knack.

Pioneers Should Have Money

Pioneering is bound to be rough going in spots. The homesteader should have some capital behind him. For foodstuffs and for necessary tools and equipment to get himself started. Perhaps $2,000 or $2,500 per family to draw on when or if needed.

On the other hand Alaska is a far from heartless country. It is building up steadily. Ordinarily the man who is capable and willing to work can latch on to something that will earn him enough in wages to get by while he is proving up his claim.

In the past lack of any direct overland transportation routes to Alaska has held back the Territory's development. The famous, wartime built Alcan Highway has done much to correct this. The new road is already filling up with the tourist trade in summer, and an ever increasing freight traffic.

Last summer, for example, Paul Martin, a Greeley, Colorado, fruit trucker, demonstrated his American initiative by deciding since his local business wasn't providing enough revenue he would try running up to Alaska with a load of fruit. The run was a success. He made several trips, hauling a load of Alaska salmon back to the States each time in his big 10-ton refrigerated truck after he had disposed of his fruit. On one trip he even took his 10-year-old son, Patrick, along for the ride.

Only recently President Truman

(Concluded on page 157)

Wheels of the West

Rangeland Progress from the Conestoga to the Railroads!

By DOUGLAS BUCKSTON

WHEELS truly opened the West and kept it open. First came the old freight-hauling Conestoga wagons originally devised by Pennsylvania farmers for carrying goods to market. Conestoga wagons crossed the Mississippi as early as 1823 and were moving scheduled cargo loads in Texas and New Mexico by 1831.

The Conestoga wagon gave birth to the somewhat sturdier Prairie Schooner. As often as not this was drawn by oxen rather than horses, and sometimes it carried as much as four tons.

As the West became slightly more populated the old Concord coach, no longer sufficiently elegant for the East, came West where it became "the stage coach." Some of the scheduled runs were a thousand miles long. The stage could carry as many as sixteen passengers and sometimes a few hundred pounds of cleverly-distributed freight as well. There was room for nine people inside and more could be accommodated on the outside. Motive power was usually a six-horse team.

Less common was the sail wagon, a light vehicle to which two square sails were rigged. During certain seasons of the year the wind was sufficient to propel this forward if the load wasn't too heavy. At other times a team of horses would be hitched on and an occasional breeze would do as much good as a third horse.

The railroads came in the 70s. At first railroad coaches were little more than box cars with benches along the sides, an occasional window for light and ventilation, and an indifferent wood-burning stove to provide warmth. As many as a hundred people would often be crowded into one of these cars, originally designed to accommodate thirty people. On a fast run an early train might average eighteen miles an hour.

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The Battling Belles

The True Story of a Western Frontier Hair-Pulling Match!

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

Sara glared at Marge

SARA HELMUTH landed in San Francisco in April, 1850. She had been an entertainer of no repute in New York and had made the western venture in hope that her talents would be better appreciated in a land where pretty women were still scarce.

The "Corner House," where Sara found instant employment as a waitress and singer, had something of a reputation. In a word it was a rough joint. Sara didn't mind—some of the spots she had worked in New York had been as bad or worse. If a drunk got fresh Sara would pull off her high heeled slipper and pop him over the head with the iron shod heel. Very effective.

But Reg McNaught, the third man so treated, resented the treatment. His sister, Marge, resented it even more. Marge was proud of her brother, including his success with the ladies, The thought that one of them, particularly a waitress in a low dive like the Corner House, had repulsed his advances set her blood aboiling.

Marge flounced into the Corner House brandishing a yard long stick of the sort many mule-drovers used to prod their beasts on. "Where's that hussy who thinks she's too good for my brother?" she demanded of the crowd.

Slowly the crowd parted and Sara made her way forward to within a dozen feet of the enraged woman. In Sara's hand was a billiard cue at least twice as long as the other woman's weapon.

Sara glared at Marge and Marge glared back. Neither of them wished to make the first move. "This stick too long for you?" asked Sara at last. She brought it down heavily on a table snapping off several feet. "This better?" she asked.

Marge, red with rage, that her courage had been so obviously challenged, lifted her mule stick and rushed her opponent. Sara, met the rush with a fencer's straight arm thrust that caught Marge right in the middle and almost doubled her over.

Sara stepped back to survey her triumph. That was her mistake. The hurt Marge righted herself and leaped barehanded at the entertainer. Her hands clutched effectively and traditionally at the showgirl's hair. Sara's screams registered pain as well as rage.

With a swift upright thrust of her knee she threw the other woman off and backward. Marge took hair with her in either fist as she was propelled backward. Now Sara sprang forward for a similar hairhold but Marge was too fast for her. A roundhouse slap that could be heard across the street caught Sara on the side of her face and sent her blubbering to the floor.

"Got you now," grunted the restaurant girl and lurched forward to kick her floored opponent. Sara caught the outthrust leg and pulled. Marge went down on the floor in a swirl of skirts revealing well formed limbs clad in clock-checked hose of green and blue. Before Marge could regain her balance the other girl was atop her, hands in the outraged sister's hair, alternately

pulling at the hair and thumping the head against the floor until Marge was unconscious.

The hurt woman was taken home and put to bed. One of her first callers when she was well enough to receive them on the second day was Sara.

Sara stood in the doorway looking at the bedded woman, in her hands a peace offering of flowers.

"You sure can fight, Miss Marge," she said.

The girl in the bed smiled. "So can you, dearie. Say, that's a nice dress you're wearing!"

Two years later San Francisco numbered one more fancy eating place. Its name was "Marge and Sara's Place," and it was owned and operated by two women who had once fought over a man!

HOMESTEADS IN ALASKA

(Concluded from page 154)

signed a bill which may lead to an eventual railroad link between the United States and Alaska. The legislation authorizes him to enter into an agreement with Canada for a survey to determine the best route for such a railroad. The rail link is vitally needed because present water and highway routes are no longer adequate to serve the expanding needs of Alaska.

Meantime if you've got what it takes to be a pioneer homesteader—or think you have—Uncle Sam will provide you with 160 good, raw farm land acres on which to prove your contention. Once you've proved it, that Alaska farm is yours—for keeps.

Answers to Questions on Page 139

1. Instead of roping, a steer could be thrown by seizing its tail and giving it a strong sidewise pull. This would throw a running animal off balance and send it over on its side.
2. Trains were frequently stopped while passengers sallied forth to shoot buffalo, antelope, geese or other game.
3. The "nurse" was a cowboy assigned to drive a wagon in which were carried the new-born calves until they were strong enough to travel with the herd under their own power.
4. A bullet. It came out of a gun, which was blued, and in most cases it made a noise as it ripped through the air, usually interpreted as a whistle hence a blue whistler.
5. Jack McCall was acquitted at first, pleading that Hickok had killed his brother. But in 1876, in Custer City, he got drunk and bragged about the murder and admitted his brother was imaginary. He was arrested in October, convicted, and hanged on March 1, 1877.

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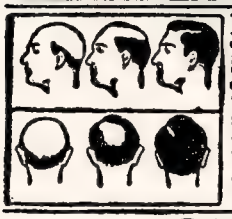

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 8)

WESTERN is going to be a first edition in every sense of the word.

We've also got a story by W. C. Tuttle, called OUT OF THE STORM, which you'll enjoy a heap, and PISTOLS FOR TWO, an unusual and clever little story by Edwin L. Sabin. You'll want more Sabin when you've read it and we're going to see if we can't persuade him to do some more work for us.

Those are the six stars for next time. And they're not all. There will be more stories and our famous short features, plus the Tally book as always. A very special issue. Look forward to it.

THE MAIL BAG

THE mail section this trip is taken up with a recent exchange of letters between the Ramrod and a gun enthusiast who took exception to one of the questions in Cow Country Quiz not so long ago. And since the information about guns which is brought out in these letters should be mighty interesting to you folks, we're just going to up and print the whole works as is.

Referring to your department "Cow-Country Quiz," in GIANT WESTERN for October, page 145—

You ask the question "what was the difference between the Frontier Colt and the Peacemaker Colt," and answer it on page 153 by saying "the Peacemaker was .45 calibre and the Frontier .44 calibre."

Not long ago I wrote a letter to the editor of THRILLING WESTERN, in which this same question appeared, and explained the error you have made in your answer to this question. But apparently GIANT WESTERN and its companion publication, THRILLING WESTERN, have accepted the general belief in regard to these revolvers and will listen to nothing else.

I am not going to repeat the statements made in my letter to the editor of THRILLING WESTERN, but I do have something which might prove of interest. Lying on the table before me as I write these lines, is a so-called Frontier Colt, CALIBRE .45! Laugh this one off—if you can!

This particular Frontier Colt is a single-action revolver with a five-inch barrel. It has hard rubber grips and measures approximately eleven inches over-all; and on the left side of the frame, just below the cylinder, there are these words: pat. Sept. 19, 1871, July 2, 1872, and Jan. 19, 1875. Also on this side is the inscription ".45 Cal." engraved on the forward

side of the trigger guard.

And don't say the weapon I have is a Peacemaker. If you do, then you will be agreeing with my previous statement to the editor of THRILLING WESTERN: that the Frontier Colt is, in reality, a Peacemaker, the only difference being a rather confusing variation of calibres and barrel lengths.

It might also interest you to know that I have seen this same revolver (the so-called Frontier Colt) in calibres .41 and 32-30. The barrel of the 32-30 is slightly longer than those of the .41 and .45, but from the standpoint of outward appearances they are all basically the same revolver.

Just because a H & R Target Revolver is available in calibres .38, .32, and .22, we do not say they are three different types of weapons.—*Eugene H. Mitchell, Dallas, Texas.*

And our answer:

The gun question seems to be worrying you considerably, judging from your letter of June 23rd to THRILLING WESTERN and the similar letter of August 27th to GIANT WESTERN. We are pleased to welcome you to our large family of readers and delighted to split a hair with you over the matter of gun calibres.

It seems to us that the crux of the business is right in your letter of June 23rd, where you say: "You ask the question, 'What was the difference between the "Frontier Colt" and the "Peacemaker"?' and answer it on page 153 by saying the Peacemaker was calibre .45 and the Frontier Colt calibre .44." Technically speaking, this is true enough. Having granted that, you then go on to point out that both guns were made in other calibres as well.

Now, to borrow a phrase from you, technically speaking, that is true enough. But the distinction between the guns and the only practical way to distinguish between them was by the original difference in calibre, which was what Colt intended. Let us quote from Colt's 100th Aniversary Firearms Manual, published in 1937:

"In 1873, the famous 'Peacemaker' was introduced. This was a .45 calibre C. F. revolver designed for the Army, which after several years of competitive tests was adopted by the U. S. War Department in 1875. The model was later produced in calibres .32-20; .32 Long Colt; .38 Long Colt; .41 Long Colt; .38-40; .44-40 and .44 S. & W. Russian. Barrel lengths, 4¾, 5½ and 7½ inches with ejector; 3½ and 4 inches without ejector.

"The same six-shooter was produced in .44 and .44-40 calibres and became famous as the Colt Frontier revolver."

Now if even Colt states that this was the same six-shooter and yet lists the Peacemaker as being made in .44-40 and the Frontier as being made in .44-40, you can see there is apt to be a little confusion. The only thing Colt does not say is that the Frontier was made in a .45 calibre.

However, under the circumstances, it becomes clear that the only possible way of distinguishing between the two guns is by calibre. And the original intention of the makers was that the Peacemaker be a .45 and the Frontier a .44.

[*Turn page*]

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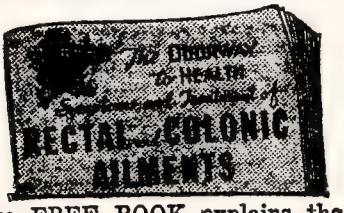

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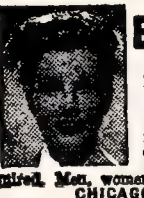

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The latter was expressly designed to take the same cartridge as the Winchester Carbine so that a cowboy would not have to carry two different kinds of cartridges.

Incidentally, the Frontier Colt is still being manufactured in these calibres:

.32-20	.44 Special
.38 Special	.44-40
.357 Magnum	.45 Colt
.38-40	

This would appear to be a final, definitive blending of the old Frontier and the Peacemaker models into one. But from all this I hope you see the reason for our simplifying our question and answer to the basic fundamentals.

Thanks for your interest—we enjoy talking about such things with you and we enjoy evidence that our readers are alert enough to catch us up whenever they think we've pulled a boner.—*The Ramrod.*

This drew the following comment from Mr. Mitchell:

To say I was surprised at receiving your letter of September 1st would be putting it mildly. As a matter of fact, I had to reread the letter several times before I could bring myself to believe I had actually received it.

It would seem from your letter that we were both correct in our initial comments regarding the "Peacemaker" and the "Frontier Colt." Yet I do feel I owe you an apology for my error in assuming you had accepted the common belief that the Peacemaker was made only in calibre .45, and the Frontier only in calibre .44. Had I considered your question and answer more carefully, perhaps I would have realized you were thinking of space limitations in your magazine when the question and answer were first made up. And I don't mind admitting that had I been in your position, I probably would have used the same question and answer arrangement you employed; it certainly dispensed with a long and involved text aimed at explaining the confusing technicalities shrouding Colt's revolvers.

This confusion enveloping Colt revolvers seems to be a matter of tradition. Even in the days of the percussions, Colt's models were made in a confused assortment of sizes, calibres and barrel lengths. Consequently, the same model percussion might be—and sometimes was—made with either 5 or 6 chambers in the cylinder.

I attribute much importance to your letter. Not only does it give the various calibres in which the Peacemaker was produced—information which I had been unable to acquire elsewhere—but it also disproves the statements of many people who have led me to believe these revolvers are not manufactured today.

But your letter goes even further than that. It reveals a personal interest in your readers; and that, my friend, is more than I can say for many of the magazines on the market today.

Few people will admit their errors, but it pleases me greatly to tell you that you certainly know your revolvers. Next time I'll think twice before questioning the authenticity of your statements.

Please keep up the good work in both WEST and GIANT WESTERN—and thanks again for your most informative letter. It will be

placed in my files for future reference.—*Eugene H. Mitchell, Dallas 6, Texas.*

We'd sure like to thank Mr. Mitchell for his fine letters. He knows plenty about guns and he is hereby given permission to catch us every time we make any kind of mistake about guns.

Anyway, friends, we're sure glad to hear from you at all times. Just sit down and dash off a note or a postcard to the Ramrod, GIANT WESTERN Magazine, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. See you next time.

—THE RAMROD.

Treasure Trove

By JOHN BLACK

THE treasure trove of the Jesse James gang is still a mystery. For many years various people have been seeking the alleged $1,500,000, or a clue to its whereabouts.

Recently one John Trammel, aged 109, who says he was one of the famous James gang, claimed that Jesse James and he cached the money in an iron box in a cemetery near Zanesville, Oregon, back around 1880. The understanding was, said Trammel, that the money belonged to all of the gang.

Fortified with a ragged old map, Trammel led a party, including relatives of James, to the spot. After digging down several feet they found an old iron box showing signs of considerable age and wear. The box was anxiously forced open. It was empty.

"Jesse must have needed the money," said Trammel. "He wouldn't have taken it otherwise. Or maybe he moved it to a better spot and couldn't find the rest of us to tell us where." The search continues in the Zanesville area.

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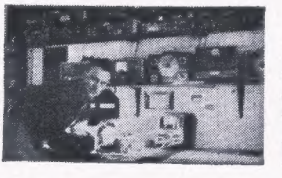

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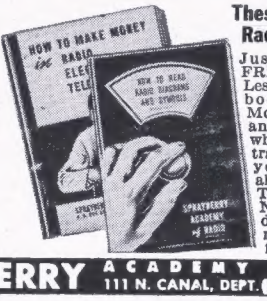

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